Welcome to the NLP-CoP 2025 Year in Review!

The [Natural Language Processing Community of Practice](#) (NLP-CoP) is a diverse community open to anyone interested in tech, data, AI, and their applications in development, humanitarian, human rights, and other social sectors. We're a global group with members from all over the world.

This CoP has come a long way since 2022, when it was founded! This year was a manifestation of how important it is to have independent, industry-free spaces to discuss how we can responsibly use AI tools in our day-to-day work while minimizing the negative impacts of AI systems on communities, organizations and society more broadly. As large, resource-intensive, general-purpose AI models cause undeniable harm to people and the planet, holding space to grapple with the broad repercussions of AI, discuss the practical implications of these technologies, and think about alternatives that take advantage of the capabilities of AI while mitigating the harms feels more important than ever.

For us, 2025 was a year for crucial discussions about privacy, ethics, bias, consent, and harm caused by AI, as much as it was for conversations about designing feminist AI, raising considerations about climate and environmental impacts, working with small language models, prioritising deployment of tech in purposeful and controlled ways, and reminding ourselves that responsible and ethical principles don't stifle innovation – they make room for the right kind of innovation! In the next pages, we share some of the highlights from our year. We invite you to explore the resources and reflections we all produced together.

Thank you for being a part of this Community of Practice. The wealth of knowledge and diversity of perspectives our community members bring make this space so meaningful!

In 2025, our CoP grew:

Our community is currently made up of almost 2,000 individuals! We gained over 600 new members in 2025, and it's been great to see how the community has expanded despite unfortunately losing contact with dozens of members who were affected by the US Government's defunding of the aid sector.

600
new members

Our LinkedIn group grew as well, with over 220 new members.**

Our members come from over 100 countries, and they are working in sectors like development, humanitarian organizations, human rights, peace-building, environment and climate, and philanthropy.

Early in 2025, we welcomed a new Community Manager for the CoP, Bárbara Paes. We worked on improving CoP member experiences by rolling out tweaks in our onboarding process (including this simplified Welcome Kit), transferring our monthly newsletter to a new platform, and ensuring steady and consistent communications with community members and working groups.

Bárbara Paes
(Community Manager at MTI's CoP)

*Some of our official CoP members are also part of the LinkedIn group and others are only part of one or the other.

We gathered, often!

Different working groups hosted 25 events covering a variety of topics such as:

- the impact of AI on workers,
- the use of AI in qualitative research,
- accountability in the humanitarian context,
- linguistic complexity and AI in Africa,
- the repercussions of the US AI Action Plan,
- evaluating LLMs for accuracy and inclusion, and
- the challenges and tensions of creating organizational AI policies.

Throughout the year, our events had a combined attendance of 1500 community members.

1500
event participants

We also attended conferences such as RightsCon, American Evaluation Association Conference, DataFest Africa, SAMEA, and AI for Development and Impact Conference, to name a few.

We shared knowledge across the CoP and beyond

40+
experts

Our gatherings featured over 40 expert speakers working in 15+ countries – academic researchers, humanitarian practitioners, technologists, digital policy experts, human rights specialists, organizers and activists, journalists, and more.

20+
blogs

Our working group leads published over 20 think-pieces to share learnings from our CoP gatherings.

Critical resources

Our team at MTI developed resources such as the Tool for Assessing AI Vendors (with Revolution Impact), Guidelines on Ethical AI-Powered Social & Behaviour Change Chatbots (with Girl Effect), A Generative AI Use Case for Public Sector MERL, a Landscape on Made in Africa AI and MERL, a paper and policy piece on the use of AI in Democracy Evaluation, and a guide with key questions to ask before using GenAI for research on violence against women.

We wrote two academic pieces as well, which will be published in the next few months: "Archetypes of AI Adoption: A Snapshot in Time" for The Foundation Review, and an article on AI and Transformational Evaluation for the Journal on Multidisciplinary Evaluation (JMDE).

Trainings

We also developed our offer of in-depth, paid training offerings, offering courses on AI for Social & Behaviour Change, the use of AI to strengthen data analytics and evaluation practice, and small language models.

We were home to countless conversations about responsible, ethical applications of AI for MERL (and more!)

In 2025, our working groups were home to countless conversations about responsible, ethical applications of AI for MERL.

Between online gatherings, conversations on Slack and LinkedIn, and our monthly newsletter, our working group leads develop their fantastic work through deepening connections and networks; exploring ethical and responsible tools, systems, code, and models with community members; and curating nuanced conversations about the implications of AI in our work.

This year, we launched two new working groups: the Gender, MERL, and AI Working Group and the Climate & AI Working Group.

Explore 2025 highlights from the working groups (and their plans for 2026!)

Gender, MERL, and AI Working Group:

Led by Savita Bailur and Allison Sambo, this working group's kick-off call in January had a whopping participation rate of over 300 people, demonstrating an undeniable interest within our community to discuss the gendered impacts of AI, issues of ethics and accountability, feminist and decolonial lenses to AI and MERL, and the intersection of AI, gender, and climate. Throughout the year, this working group discussed whether AI promotes Gender Equity or Automates Inequality, learned about what building a feminist AI can look like, and talked about detecting gender bias in AI tools.

> Next year, we plan to expand the convening of this group and continue discussing key topics at the intersection of gender, AI, monitoring and evaluation, research, and learning. Kecia Bertermann will join as a co-lead. Some topics of interest have included unconscious bias that comes through when using LLMs for qualitative analysis, as well as the disproportionate impact of AI use in terms of climate disruption on women. We've been drafting a 12-month plan for 2026, and we'll be excited to share it in January.

Savita Bailur

Allison Sambo

Ethics and Governance Working Group:

Co-led by Isabelle Amazon-Brown, Grace Lyn Higdon, and Linda Raftree, this was the space for indispensable conversations about the ethical implications of using AI, including the impact of AI on workers; the challenges of conducting qualitative research and adapting to the use of AI by research respondents; and the challenges and tensions of creating organizational AI policies.

> We will continue digging into the area of organizational AI Policies and Guidance. We also plan to collaborate with industry associations (such as the American, European, and African Evaluation Associations) on drafting (or adapting) a set of principles and guidance and evaluator competencies related to the use of AI in Evaluation that would be adopted by global professional evaluation associations. Our working group meetings will continue to explore politics and power issues in the AI space as well. We will aim to bring in a human rights legal perspective to these discussions, in particular comparing conversations in the EU and the US.

Isabelle Amazon-Brown

Grace Lyn Higdon

Linda Raftree

Humanitarian AI Working Group:

Under the leadership of Quito Tsui, this working group hosted in-depth conversations about [Technocolonialism in the age of Humanitarian AI](#) and reflected on the [questions humanitarians should be asking themselves about AI](#) use to ensure they are accountable to communities in the face of growing financial pressures and techno-solutionism. In February, Quito [hosted a session during RightsCon](#), focusing on mapping the current state of M&E of humanitarian AI and the kinds of M&E frameworks necessary to ensure the humanitarian sector is able to effectively assess AI tools. We also introduced a ["4,3,2,1: The Humanitarian AI Countdown"](#), a new event series designed to respond to the need for quick and incisive takes on recent AI research, distilled for humanitarian stakeholders. The first event of the series, with Shivaang Sharma, focused on how [humanitarian organizations operationalize Responsible AI](#).

> In 2026, we will continue to curate a selection of experts who will bring their recent AI research, distilled for humanitarian stakeholders. We'll be doing more bite-sized sessions to share the latest research and reports in the AI and Humanitarian space. The working group will continue to play a key role in holding space for humanitarians to discuss some of the toughest challenges around tech and data use. Keep an eye out for more roundtable discussions and hands-on discussions that bring together key stakeholders from across the humanitarian ecosystem.

Quito Tsui

Sandbox Working Group:

Zach Tilton, Pedro Prieto Martin, and Jonas Norén created spaces for community members to delve into the technical nuts and bolts of LLMs, NLP, and GenAI applications: They promoted sessions about testing Large and Small Language Models on evaluation tasks, brought together experts to share the real-world applications of knowledge graphs, and partnered with the Gender, MERL, and AI working group to host an event on evaluating LLMs for accuracy and inclusion.

In 2026, Zach will be stepping back from the Sandbox Working Group and Cathy Richards will join as a co-lead with Jonas and Pedro who are continuing in their roles.

> We are keen on promoting further opportunities to exchange our experimentations and knowledge. We'll likely be running the Small Language Models workshop again, and maybe even running one that is a step more advanced!

Zach Tilton

Pedro Prieto Martin

Jonas Norén

AI in African Evaluation Working Group:

After welcoming our AI+Africa Lead, Vari Matimba (thanks to funding from The Hewlett Foundation!), this working group developed considerably! In addition to connecting with working group members to align on collective priorities for Made in Africa AI Approaches to MERL, hosting conversations about linguistic complexity and AI in Africa, and about the intersection of Climate and AI in the African context, Vari published a landscape study to explore how AI is shaping MERL across Africa, based on in-depth interviews with 20 diverse participants—practitioners, NLP developers, and researchers working in diverse contexts across the continent. Through this work, we made several important connections with African organizations working in similar spaces!

" We will build on and deepen the themes that emerged from our Landscape Study, including more focused deep dives on specific areas. We are planning to run a few in-person training sessions at upcoming conferences and to develop deeper partnerships with various organizations working on AI and MERL on the African continent.

Vari Matimba

Climate & AI Working Group:

Led by Cathy Richards and Lakshmee Sharma, this working group was launched in July, and since then, it's been one of the most lively Slack channels in our community, with monthly resources providing insight into how climate and AI intersect. The working group co-lead, Cathy, has also teamed up with the Africa Working Group Lead, Vari, to facilitate an event focusing on Climate-Responsible AI in Africa, as well as hosted a workshop for 30 participants on Small Language Models with Jonas Norén (co-lead of Sandbox Working Group).

" In 2026, the Climate + AI working group plans on hosting events and conversations focusing on issues such as how to accurately measure and mitigate the environmental footprint of these technologies, what can the sector expect (and push for) from policymakers in the coming years, and what are the innovations coming out of this space to make AI more sustainable and climate-friendly. You can also expect to see a new co-lead to replace Lakshmee who will be stepping down from co-leading the group (but will continue to be engaged as a member!).

Cathy Richards   Lakshmee Sharma

Social and Behavior Change Working Group:

Co-led by Kecia Bertermann, Sarah Osman, Nicola Harford, and Isabelle Amazon-Brown, in 2025 this working group hosted a roundtable on the [emerging evidence on GenAI for Social & Behavioral Change](#), with speakers from 6 organizations sharing data that demonstrates something important about the true value of GenAI in supporting SBC programming – from using GenAI to directly answer users' questions, to improving overall User Experience, or supporting agricultural extension workers. In December, Isabelle led an Intro to AI for SBC training in Kenya during the Global Digital Health forum with support from Linda and Nicola. This distilled and built off the two-part virtual training on AI and SBC attended by 35+ participants in August.

" Among other things, in 2026, we are planning a webinar series showcasing learnings from a series of online experiments related to AI-enabled approaches to design, monitor, and evaluate a digital sexual and reproductive health campaign over the past three years. We are also planning to attend (and host a side-event at!) the SBCC summit in June.

Kecia Bertermann

Sarah Osman

Nicola Harford

Isabelle Amazon-Brown

Philanthropy Working Group:

Through a 3-part event series this year, funded by the California Health Care Foundation, the Philanthropy Working Group convened over 100 people working in foundations, funders, and philanthropic organizations for conversations about AI in the sector. Co-led by Stephanie Coker, Alberto Ortega Hinajosa, Kevin Hong, Veronica Olazabal, and Stephanie Teleki, this working group facilitated exchanges about how philanthropic organizations can use tools and frameworks for assessing AI vendors and AI investments, how philanthropies can support grantees to strengthen their knowledge of effective and responsible use of AI for MERL, and to discuss a snapshot in time of AI in the Foundation Sector. We also secured funding for hosting two AI and Philanthropy Colloquia and documenting learning from these to share with the wider sector.

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We are interested in promoting more "cross-pollination" across working groups, focusing on "deeper versus growing bigger," and potentially supporting more training sessions across the CoP. We will be gearing up for a Colloquium (funded by the Packard Foundation) that will bring together foundations to further explore their use of AI.

Stephanie Coker

Alberto Ortega Hinojosa

Kevin Hong

Veronica Olazabal

Stephanie Teleki

See you in 2026!

2025 was both an exciting and challenging year in the AI space, with a lot of learning and doing. We thank everyone in the CoP and our Working Group Co-Leads for working alongside us for another year, and we look forward to more in 2026!

Some key areas of focus for MTI and the CoP in the coming year include:

- Taking a closer look at AI Evaluation
- Supporting AI Policy at organization and sector levels
- Documenting and sharing internal use of AI in different types of organizations
- Sharing good practices and learning from AI Challenge Funds
- Planning for a Foundation-focused colloquium on AI
- Regular CoP meetings
- More focused training sessions on topics such as small language models, AI and Gender, UX design for chatbots, developing AI policies and frameworks for evaluation.

In 2026, we plan on launching two new regional working groups, one focusing on community members working in Asia and another in Latin America.

Linda Raftree,
Founder, The MERL Tech Initiative