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**Information technology — Artificial intelligence —
Environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems**

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Contents

Foreword.....	ix
Introduction.....	x
1 Scope.....	1
2 Normative references	1
3 Terms and definitions.....	1
4 Symbols and abbreviated terms	5
5 Purpose.....	6
5.1 General.....	6
5.2 The London Declaration.....	7
5.3 Existing International Standards	7
5.4 Environmental sustainability in the European Artificial Intelligence Act	7
5.5 Enacted climate change legislation and market response	8
5.6 Access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy	8
6 Environmental sustainability.....	8
6.1 General.....	8
6.2 Energy consumption.....	8
6.3 Geographic considerations.....	10
6.4 Water use	12
6.5 Cooling	12
6.6 Carbon footprint	13
6.7 Consumption patterns and rebound effects	15
6.8 Waste.....	16
7 Perspectives of environmental sustainability of AI systems.....	16
7.1 General.....	16
7.2 AI system ecosystem.....	17
7.3 AI system life cycle	20
7.4 AI system supply chain	20
7.5 Other perspectives	20
8 AI system ecosystem perspective.....	21
8.1 General.....	21
8.2 AI system	21
8.3 AI function	22
8.4 Machine learning.....	23
8.5 AI engineering	23
8.6 Big data and data sources	23
8.7 Cloud and edge computing	24
8.8 Resource pools	24
9 AI system life cycle perspective	24
9.1 General.....	24
9.2 Inception	28
9.3 Design and development.....	28
9.4 Verification and validation.....	29
9.5 Deployment.....	30
9.6 Operation and monitoring.....	30
9.7 Continuous validation.....	31
9.8 Re-evaluate.....	31
9.9 Retirement.....	32

10	AI system supply chain approach to determine environmental sustainability aspects	32
10.1	General.....	32
10.2	Elements.....	32
10.3	Mines	33
10.4	Smelters and refiners.....	33
10.5	Component manufacturers	34
10.6	Assemblers	34
10.7	Distributors	34
10.8	Domestic infrastructure.....	34
10.9	Internet infrastructure.....	35
10.10	AI Training.....	35
10.11	Data preparation, labelling and dataset size.....	35
10.12	Device abandonment.....	36
10.13	Collection of abandoned devices.....	38
10.14	Shipping of abandoned devices	39
10.15	Recovering of abandoned devices.....	39
10.16	Disposing of abandoned devices	40
11	Measuring the environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems	40
11.1	General.....	40
11.2	AI system ecosystem measurements	40
11.3	AI system life cycle measurements.....	42
11.4	AI system supply chain measurements	43
11.5	Other measurements.....	46
12	Approaches to reducing AI systems' negative environmental impacts	49
12.1	General.....	49
12.2	Ecosystem approaches.....	50
12.3	Life cycle approaches	52
12.4	Supply chain approaches	53
Annex A This document's clauses mapped to the UN Sustainability Development Goals.....		55
Bibliography		5
https://standards.iteh.ai/catalog/standards/iso/cd5b39bb-f73e-4ca9-9c41-c6ec8ecadcdc/iso-iec-dtr-20226		
Foreword.....		viii
Introduction.....		ix
1	Scope.....	1
2	Normative references	1
3	Terms and definitions.....	1
4	Symbols and abbreviated terms.....	4
5	Purpose.....	5
5.1	General.....	5
5.2	The London Declaration.....	6
5.3	Existing ISO/IEC International Standards	6
5.4	Environmental sustainability in the European Artificial Intelligence Act	6
5.5	Enacted climate change legislation and market response	6
5.6	Access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy.....	7
6	Environmental sustainability.....	7
6.1	General.....	7
6.2	Energy consumption.....	7
6.2.1	General.....	7

6.2.2	Types and sources of energy.....	8
6.2.3	Physical renewable energy supply, Power Purchasing Agreements and offsets.....	8
6.3	Geographic considerations.....	9
6.3.1	General.....	9
6.3.2	Location.....	9
6.3.3	Distribution of energy sources.....	9
6.3.4	Freight transportation of energy sources.....	9
6.3.5	Handling and storage of energy sources.....	10
6.4	Water use.....	10
6.5	Cooling.....	11
6.5.1	General.....	11
6.5.2	Types of cooling.....	11
6.5.3	Post cooling use.....	11
6.6	Carbon footprint.....	11
6.6.1	General.....	11
6.6.2	Applicable use of measurements and carbon accounting methods.....	12
6.6.3	Estimation versus measurement.....	13
6.6.4	Carbon leakage.....	13
6.7	Consumption patterns and rebound effects.....	13
6.8	Waste.....	13
6.8.1	General.....	13
6.8.2	Types of waste.....	14
6.8.3	E-waste.....	14
7	Perspectives of environmental sustainability of AI systems.....	14
7.1	General.....	14
7.2	AI system ecosystem.....	15
7.3	AI system life cycle.....	17
7.4	AI system supply chain.....	17
7.5	Other perspectives.....	17
8	AI system ecosystem perspective.....	17
8.1	General.....	17
8.2	AI system.....	18
8.3	AI function.....	18
8.4	Machine learning.....	19
8.5	AI engineering.....	19
8.6	Big data and data sources.....	19
8.7	Cloud and edge computing.....	20
8.8	Resource pools.....	20
9	AI system life cycle perspective.....	20
9.1	General.....	20
9.1.1	AI system life cycle in ISO/IEC 5338.....	21
9.1.2	Life cycle assessment in ISO 14040 and ISO 14044.....	22
9.2	Inception.....	23
9.3	Design and development.....	23
9.4	Verification and validation.....	24
9.5	Deployment.....	25
9.6	Operation and monitoring.....	25
9.7	Continuous validation.....	26
9.8	Re-evaluate.....	26
9.9	Retirement.....	26
10	AI system supply chain approach to determine environmental sustainability aspects.....	27
10.1	General.....	27

10.2	Elements	27
10.3	Mines	27
10.4	Smelters and refiners	28
10.5	Component manufacturers	28
10.6	Assemblers	28
10.7	Distributors	29
10.8	Domestic infrastructure	29
10.9	Internet infrastructure	29
10.10	AI Training	29
10.11	Data preparation, labelling and dataset size	30
10.12	Device abandonment	30
10.13	Collection of abandoned devices	32
10.14	Shipping of abandoned devices	32
10.15	Recovering of abandoned devices	33
10.16	Disposing of abandoned devices	33
11	Measuring the environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems	34
11.1	General	34
11.2	AI system ecosystem measurements	34
11.2.1	General	34
11.2.2	Energy consumption	34
11.2.3	CPU energy	34
11.2.4	GPU energy	34
11.2.5	Accelerated processing unit energy	35
11.2.6	Energy efficiency	35
11.2.7	Power usage effectiveness	35
11.2.8	Renewable energy factor	35
11.2.9	Water usage effectiveness	35
11.2.10	Carbon usage effectiveness	35
11.2.11	Energy efficiency improvement	35
11.2.12	Carbon efficiency	36
11.3	AI system life cycle measurements	36
11.3.1	General	36
11.3.2	Energy Precision Ratio (M)	36
11.4	AI system supply chain measurements	36
11.4.1	General	36
11.4.2	Raw material extraction method	36
11.4.3	Transportation of materials	37
11.4.4	Material hazard and environmental leaching risk	37
11.4.5	Material sustainability	37
11.4.6	Material processing	37
11.4.7	Transportation emissions	37
11.4.8	Manufacturing and product emissions	38
11.4.9	Water use	38
11.4.10	Natural gas	38
11.4.11	Power	38
11.4.12	Light pollution	38
11.4.13	Electrical, signal or radio wave pollution	39

11.4.14	Physical ecosystem disruption	39
11.4.15	Community	39
11.5	Other measurements	39
11.5.1	General	39
11.5.2	Carbon intensity of a machine learning model	39
11.5.3	Software Carbon Intensity	40
11.5.4	Operational carbon emissions	41
11.5.5	Embodied carbon emissions	41
12	Approaches to reducing AI systems' negative environmental impacts	41
12.1	General	41
12.2	Ecosystem approaches	42
12.2.1	General	42
12.2.2	Geographic location	42
12.2.3	Carbon aware scheduling	42
12.2.4	Carbon aware pausing	42
12.2.5	Generative AI	42
12.2.6	Synthetic data	42
12.2.7	Adapting a foundation	43
12.2.8	Transfer learning	43
12.2.9	Use of structured data versus brute force	43
12.2.10	Utilising local hardware and specialised circuits	43
12.2.11	Augmenting cloud usage data	43
12.3	Life cycle approaches	44
12.3.1	General	44
12.3.2	Carbon-Aware Core SDK	44
12.3.3	Computationally efficient algorithms	44
12.3.4	Using pretrained models	44
12.3.5	Automated ML	44
12.3.6	Federated learning methods	44
12.3.7	Customized processors	44
12.3.8	Energy efficient reinforcement learning practises	45
12.3.9	Using public APIs	45
12.4	Supply chain approaches	45
12.4.1	General	45
12.4.2	Certification of hardware and data centers	45
12.4.3	Using recycled rare earth elements in AI specific hardware	45
12.4.4	Applying circular economy concepts and principles	45
12.4.5	Business improvement methodologies	46
Annex A	TR 20226 clauses mapped to the UN Sustainability Development Goals	47
A.1	Introduction	47
A.2	UN Sustainability Development Goals	47
Bibliography		3

Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a and IEC (the International Electrotechnical Commission) form the specialized system for worldwide federation of national standards standardization. National bodies (that are members of ISO member bodies). The work of IEC participate in the development of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International by the respective organization to deal with particular fields of technical activity. ISO and IEC technical committees collaborate in fields of mutual interest. Other international organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO and IEC, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO documents document should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives); 2 (see www.iso.org/directives or www.iec.ch/members_experts/refdocs).

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This document was prepared by Joint Technical Committee ISO/IEC JTC-1, Information technology, Subcommittee SC-42, Artificial intelligence.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html; www.iso.org/members.html and www.iec.ch/national-committees.

Introduction

Unprecedentedly large and ever-growing deep learning models, large language models, natural language understanding networks and generative AI applications require vast data storage capacities, take weeks to train, are running continuously, require a lot of compute power as well as memory to load the models. And once completed they consume substantial amounts of network connectivity bandwidth in operation. Sixty per cent of IT industry carbon emissions come from the downstream use of products by customers.

The use of power intensive GPUs to run machine learning training (and non-AI uses such as crypto currency mining) has already been cited as contributing to increased carbon dioxide emissions^{[4], [1]}. Many machine learning packages have been modified to take advantage of the extensive parallelism available inside the average graphics processing unit. Often this resource intensity is used to exemplify environmental concerns with AI systems.

According to the World Economic Forum and experts in the field, AI has “the potential to accelerate environmental degradation, and is already doing so”^{[4], [1], [2]}. In 2022, the OECD’s Policy Observatory^{[3], [3]} that provided input into basic framework for understanding, measuring and benchmarking domestic AI computing capacity by country and region, did not consider environmental sustainability in its charter^{[4], [4]}.

The AI system life cycle does provide opportunities to consider and positively influence the environmental sustainability aspects of the system: for example, using and applying teacher–student models^{[4], [5]} in deep neural networks represents a trade-off between more learning and better inference performance when in production.

Improving in-operation product performance can, conversely, aid sustainability. Publications from the European Union^{[4], [4], [6, 7]}, the United States^{[4], [4], [8-10]}, the United Nations^{[4], [4], [11, 12]} and other regional^{[4], [13]} and global think tanks^{[4], [14]} have called for better understanding and disclosure with regards to ICT’s environmental footprint and that of AI systems in particular.

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Information technology — Artificial intelligence — Environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems

1 Scope

This document provides an overview of the environmental sustainability aspects (e.g. workload, resource and asset utilization, carbon impact, pollution, waste, transportation, location) of AI systems during their life cycle, and related potential metrics.

~~It is not the intention of this report to~~NOTE 1 ~~This document does not~~ identify opportunities on how AI, AI applications and AI systems can improve environmental, social or economic sustainability outcomes.

NOTE 2 This document can help other projects in ISO, IEC and other SDOs related to AI system environmental sustainability.

2 Normative references

The following documents are referred to in the text in such a way that some or all of their content constitutes requirements of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO/IEC 22989:2022, *Information technology — Artificial intelligence — Artificial intelligence concepts and terminology*

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions given in ISO/IEC 22989:2022 and the following apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

- ISO Online browsing platform: available at <https://www.iso.org/obp>
- IEC Electropedia: available at <https://www.electropedia.org/>

3.1 3.1

environmental sustainability

state in which the ecosystem and its functions are maintained for the present and future generations

[SOURCE: ISO 17889-1:2021, 3.1.1]

3.2

3.2

social responsibility

responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that

- contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society;
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders;
- is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour; and

— is integrated throughout the organization and practised in its relationships

Note 1 to entry: Activities include products, services and processes.

Note 2 to entry: Relationships refer to an organization's activities within its sphere of influence.

[SOURCE: ISO 26000:2010, 2.18]

3.2.3.3.3

life cycle

<product>consecutive and interlinked stages of a product system, from raw material acquisition or generation from natural resources to final disposal

[SOURCE: ISO 14040:2006, 3.1]

3.3.3.4

supply chain

<product> series of processes or activities involved in the production and distribution of a material or product through which it passes from the source

[SOURCE: ISO 22095:2020, 3.2.1, ~~not modified~~ — Note 1 to entry ~~has been removed~~.]

3.4.3.5

energy consumption

quantity of *energy* ~~(3.9)~~ (3.9) applied

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 13273-1:2015, 3.1.13, ~~not modified~~ — Note 1 to entry ~~has been removed~~.]

3.5.3.6

carbon footprint of a product

CFP

sum of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and GHG removals in a product system, expressed as carbon dioxide equivalents and based on a life cycle assessment using the single impact category of climate change

[SOURCE: ISO 22948:2020, 3.1.1, changed “CO₂” to “carbon dioxide”]

3.6.3.7

carbon intensity

carbon metric ~~(3.16)~~ (3.16) expressed in relation to a specific reference unit related to the function of the AI system

Note 1 to entry: For the purposes of this document, the following terms are used as per their definitions in the following reference documents: function (ISO 15686-10:2010, 3.10) and building (ISO 6707-1:2004, 3.1.3).

Note 2 to entry: Examples of reference units may include per unit area, per person, per kilobyte, per unit output, and per GDP.

[SOURCE: ISO 16745-1:2017, 3.2, modified by changing “the function of the building” to “the function of the AI system”]

3.7.3.8

e-waste

electrical or electronic equipment which is ~~waste~~ ~~(3.18)~~, ~~waste~~ (3.18), including all components, sub-assemblies and consumables which are part of the product at the time of discarding

Note 1 to entry: Electrical and electronic products include TVs, computers, laptops, handphones, printers, printed circuit boards, refrigerators, washing machines and audio and video systems.

Note 2 to entry: E-waste contains valuable renewable resources and certain toxic substances.

[SOURCE: ISO 24161:2022, 3.1.2.5, modified — “valuable resources” in Note 2 to entry has been changed to “valuable renewable resources”.]

3.83.9.9

energy

E

capacity of a system to produce external activity or to perform work

Note 1 to entry: Commonly the term energy is used for electricity, fuel, steam, heat, compressed air and other similar substances.

Note 2 to entry: Energy is commonly expressed as a scalar quantity.

Note 3 to entry: Work as used in this definition means external supplied or extracted energy to a system. In mechanical systems, forces in or against direction of movement; in thermal systems, heat supply or heat removal.

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 13273-1:2015, 3.3.1, modified — Note 1 to entry has been updated: “media” has been replaced with “other similar substances”.]

3.93.10 3.10

energy efficiency

E_f

ratio or other quantitative relationship between an output of performance, service, goods or energy (3.9)(3.9), and an input of energy

EXAMPLE: Efficiency conversion energy; energy required/energy used; output/input; theoretical energy used to operate/energy used to operate.

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 13273-1:2015, 3.4.1, modified — Note 1 to entry removed; has been deleted.]

3.103.11 3.11

energy efficiency improvement

increase in energy efficiency (3.10)(3.10) as a result of technological, design, behavioural or economic changes

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 13273-1:2015, 3.4.3]

3.113.12 3.12

inputs

material or product that enters an organization or part of an organization

[SOURCE: ISO 22095:2020, 3.2.2, notes, modified — Notes to entry removed; have been deleted.]

3.123.13 3.13

outputs

material or product that leaves an organization or part of an organization

[SOURCE: ISO 22095:2020, 3.2.3, notes, modified — Notes to entry removed; have been deleted.]

~~3.13~~3.14 ~~3.14~~

supply chain

set of organizations with a linked set of resources and processes, each of which acts as a customer, supplier or both to form successive supplier relationships established upon placement of a purchase order, agreement, or other formal sourcing agreement.

Note ~~1~~ to entry:—A supply chain includes organizations involved in the provision of data, the design and development of AI systems or AI components or service providers involved in the development, operation, management and provision of AI services.

Note ~~2~~ to entry:—The supply chain view is relative to the position of the customer.

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 27036-1:2021, 3.10, ~~modified~~ —Note 1 to entry has been rewritten to be entirely AI-specific.]

~~3.14~~3.15 ~~3.15~~

chain of custody

process by which ~~inputs (3.13)~~(3.13) and ~~outputs (3.13)~~(3.13) and associated information are transferred, monitored and controlled as they move through each step in the relevant *supply chain* ~~(3.14)~~(3.14)

[SOURCE: ISO 22095:2020, 3.1.1]

~~3.15~~3.16 ~~3.16~~

carbon metric

sum of annual greenhouse gas emissions and removals, expressed as carbon dioxide equivalents, associated with the use stage of a building

Note ~~1~~ to entry:—For the purposes of this document, the following terms are used as per their definitions in the following reference documents: greenhouse gas emissions (ISO 14064-1:2006, 2.5), and carbon dioxide equivalents (ISO 14064-1:2006, 2.19).

[SOURCE: ISO 16745-1:2017, 3.2, ~~modified~~ —changed “CO₂” to “carbon dioxide” and Note 1 to entry has been modified to remove non-AI system references.]

~~3.16~~3.17 ~~3.17~~

carbon-aware

attribute of software or hardware that adjusts its behavior (consumption of inputs, processing, or production of outputs) in response to the carbon intensity of the energy it consumes

[SOURCE: ISO/IEC 21031:2024, 2.2]

~~3.17~~3.18 ~~3.18~~

waste

substances or objects which the holder intends or is required to dispose of

Note ~~1~~ to entry: The definition is taken from the *Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal* (22 March 1989) but is not confined to hazardous waste.

[SOURCE: ISO 14044:2006, 3.35, ~~Note 1~~ modified] — Note 1 to entry has been adapted.

~~3.18~~3.19 ~~3.19~~

circular economy

economic system that uses a systemic approach to maintain a circular flow of resources, by recovering, retaining or adding to their value, while contributing to sustainable development