

4TH EDITION
IMPACT

ELSA

Ethical, Legal and Societal Aspects of AI

Labs Magazine

ELSA (Ethical, Legal and Societal Aspects) Labs are co-creation environments for the responsible development and implementation of AI. Researchers and societal partners work together to explore AI in real-world settings and address ethical, legal and societal challenges. Through initiatives such as this magazine, the ELSA Labs Network brings together the knowledge, experiences and lessons learned across the Labs to strengthen the societal impact of responsible AI.

GET INSPIRED



ELSA Labs

ELSA Labs Full Portfolio is featured in this magazine. You can read more about the full portfolio of ELSA labs on page 38.

TAKE ME THERE

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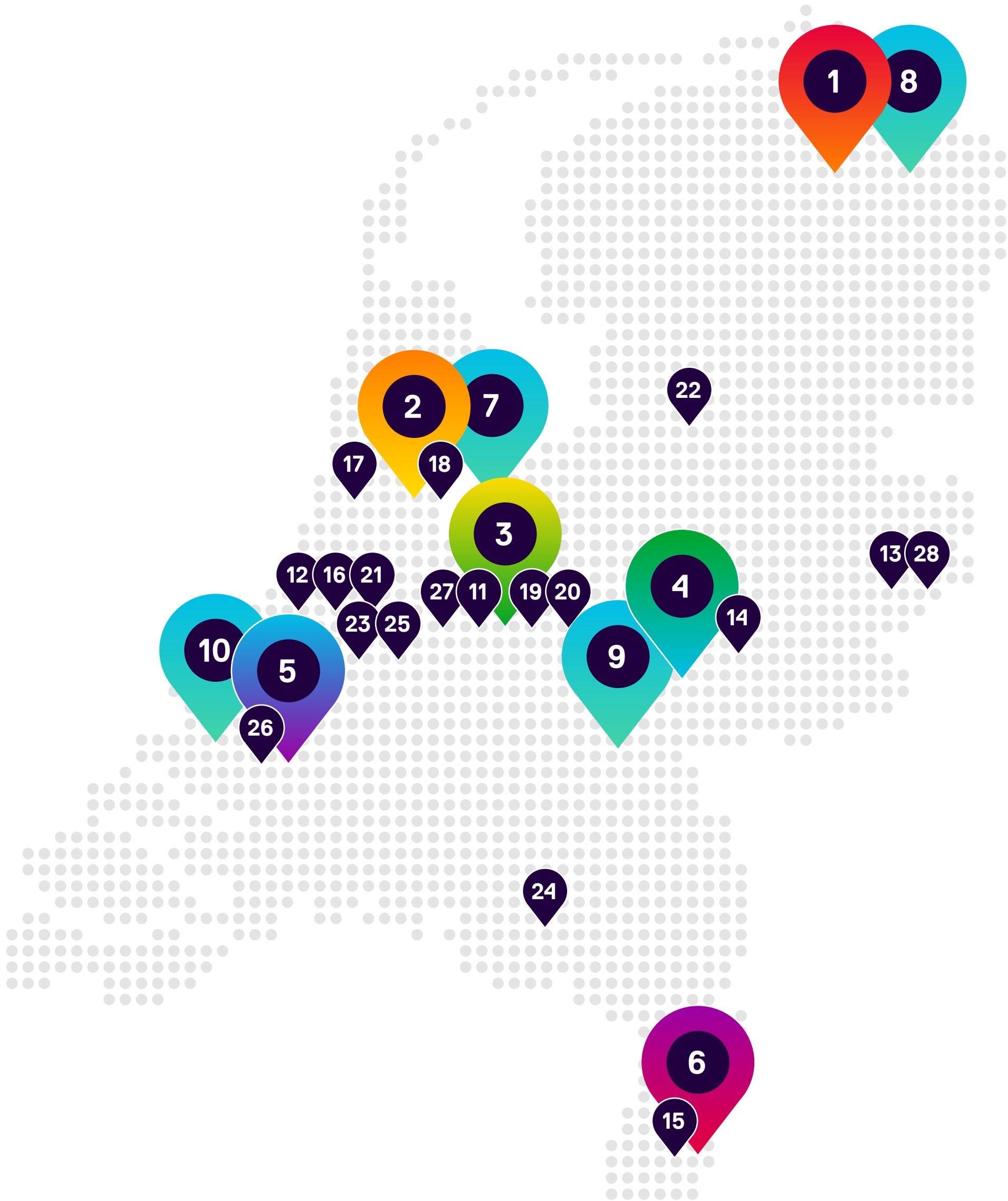


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This year’s magazine explores one central question:

What does impact really mean?

BY MIRJAM PLANTINGA

Impact is more than the outcomes we measure. It is the change we create – or hope to create – for people and society. For me, that is what ELSA labs are all about. They not only generate new scientific knowledge, but also bring together people with different perspectives to shape the future of responsible AI.



In doing so, they contribute to both scientific and societal impact. Scientific impact advances knowledge within the research community. Societal impact reaches beyond academia, influencing organisations, policies and everyday life.

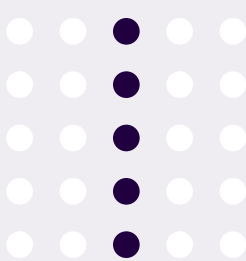
ELSA Labs realise scientific impact through both empirical and conceptual contributions. By investigating stakeholder perspectives, collaboration and co-creation, the Labs deepen our understanding of responsible AI. They also strengthen thinking around concepts such as responsible innovation, human-centred AI, transdisciplinary research,

sustainability and transparency. As one of the ELSA Labs puts it, this conceptual impact can have ‘fundamental effects, as it alters how people think and debate issues’.

Societal impact is achieved via two pathways: through process and outcome. For ELSA Labs, the way people work together is just as important as the results they achieve, because changing the process

helps shape the outcome. ELSA Labs are ‘fostering a critical understanding and mindset’, giving ‘meaningful weight to the voices that rarely make it into policy discussions’ and driving ‘every stakeholder ... into making legally, ethically and societally responsible choices’. By doing so, they create lasting impact for stakeholders, organisations and policies.

In this magazine, you will find examples of how ELSA Labs conceptualise and realise impact. To further strengthen that impact, the knowledge and experiences of the ELSA Labs will be brought together in the **ELSA Declaration**: a living document that captures the collective lessons of the network. True to the ELSA way of working, it will continue to evolve and be a document ‘that listens before it speaks’.



The ELSA declaration aims to showcase what the ELSA Labs have learned, inspire policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners and citizens to embed ELSA principles in their work, and express our shared commitment to a future in which AI is shaped by justice, democracy, ecological responsibility, and human dignity.

I hope this magazine inspires you to reflect on impact and supports your own quest to create it.

Happy reading!
Mirjam Plantinga
Project Lead, ELSA Labs Network Project



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Governing at the Speed of Change

Democratic institutions in the age of AI: what the Council of Europe has learned about turning principles into practice



What is your involvement with responsible AI and the ELSA Labs?

The Council of Europe develops international standards on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, including how these interact with technology. We are very interested in how legal and ethical principles can be translated into responsible AI practices, which makes close collaboration with researchers and ELSA Labs extremely valuable.

What impact do you expect from AI in your field?

AI is profoundly transforming democratic processes, from elections to journalism and civic participation. Its potential to strengthen democracy is undeniable, but our policy work mostly focuses on risks: lack of

transparency, manipulation, loss of autonomy, misuse of personal data. ELSA Labs can help bridge the gap between legal norms and practice by showing how concepts like transparency, fairness and human agency actually work in different contexts. That evidence is invaluable for effective policy.

How has your thinking on AI's impact changed since you started your career?

Earlier in my career, I mostly tracked political, social and historical developments to spot emerging policy needs; technological change wasn't scrutinised so systematically. Today AI permeates our societies and shapes democratic processes, making it a core part of policy analysis. What hasn't changed is the human element: technologies are made, used and felt by people. Robust policy still requires understanding both the technology and human behaviour.

What are the biggest challenges to achieving impact?

Understanding how rapidly evolving technologies function, so we can respond with appropriate policy. There is also a lack of reliable evidence about how AI is actually used. Policy development has to keep pace with technology while the evidence is still emerging, all while finding proportionate solutions that allow innovation without sacrificing safeguards.

What good practices have you seen?

I cannot overstate the value of broad collaboration. Policymakers need a close relationship with academia, civil society and the technology sector, and a real understanding of how people experience AI. We need to understand how people experience AI – what

they embrace, reject or fear, and why. The Council of Europe has already benefited from working with researchers from the University of Amsterdam and the AI, Media & Democracy Lab. These exchanges are key to turning responsible AI principles into concrete results.

Curious about the Council of Europe's work?

See the milestone of creating the first legally binding international treaty on AI, human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

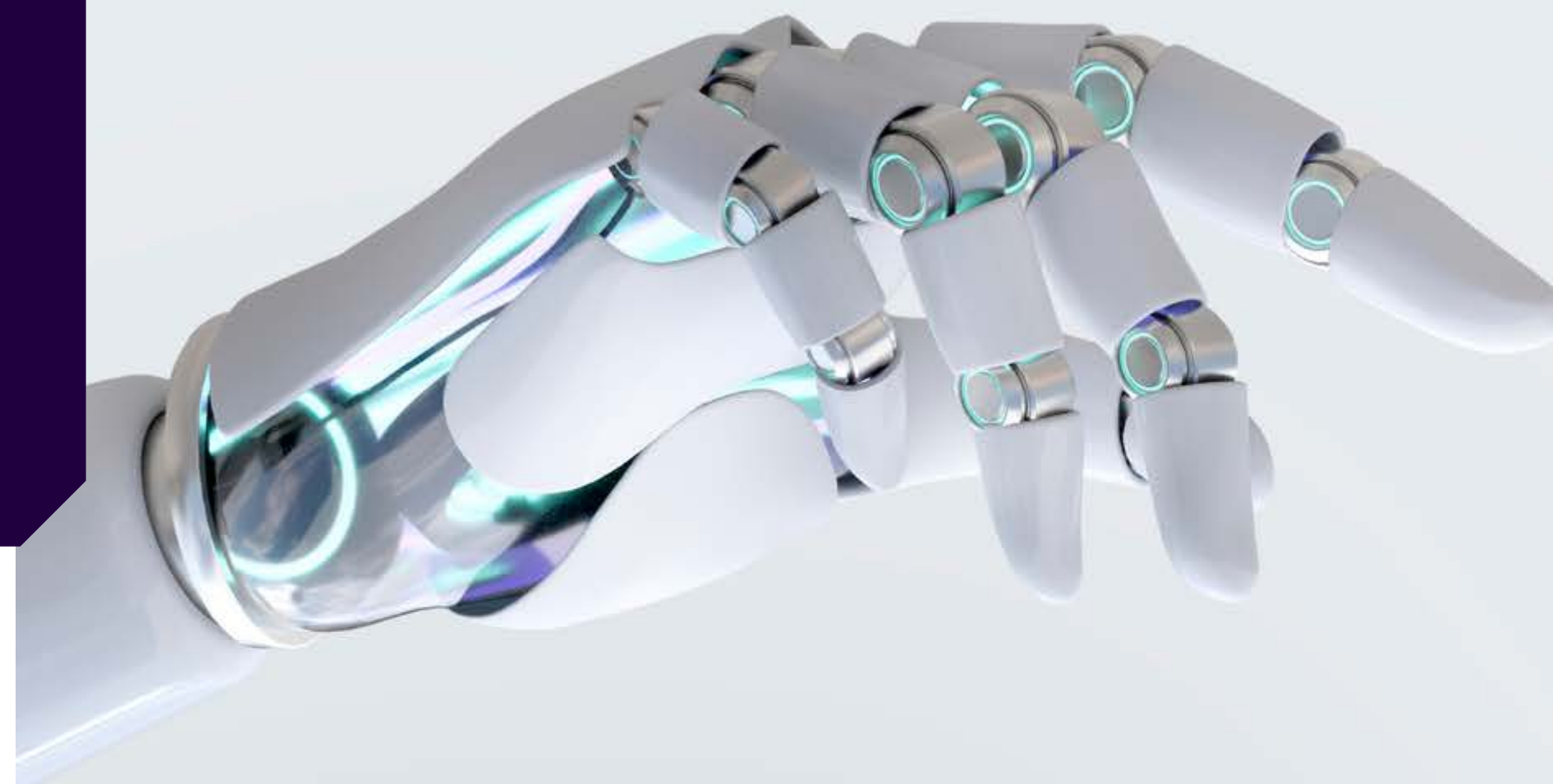
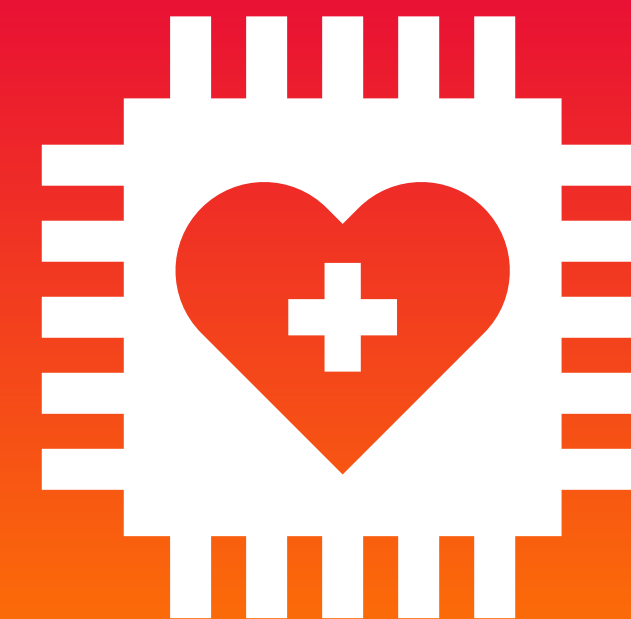
READ MORE



'Robust policy requires an understanding of both technological change and human behaviour.'

Responsible AI in Health

AI has the potential to transform healthcare, offering new opportunities to improve diagnosis, treatment and care. But only if it benefits everyone. ELSA-NN investigates the ethical, legal and societal aspects of AI in healthcare and translates this knowledge into practical tools and educational resources that support responsible AI in health.



1 ELSA AI Lab Northern Netherlands





Impact Defined People first

Impact is the effects we see, or hope to see, on people or situations. For ELSA-NN, that means ensuring AI improves healthcare without leaving people behind. The lab aims to influence how AI is developed and implemented so that it contributes positively to accessible, high-quality healthcare without increasing existing health disparities.



With the Your Technology of Tomorrow-educational programme the lab reached a large group of young people – the generation of the future – to learn about responsible AI in a playful and interactive way.

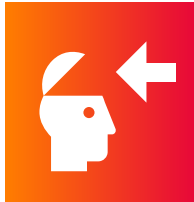


The ELSA-way Care by design

ELSA-NN promotes the responsible development and use of AI by aligning innovation with legal requirements, including transparency principles and fundamental rights, as well as ethical and societal values such as patients’ needs and concerns. The lab investigates the use of AI in a wide range of healthcare contexts, working closely with different stakeholders: AI developers, healthcare professionals, patients and citizens.

The lab generates knowledge about ethical challenges, legal frameworks such as the GDPR, AI Act and Medical Device Regulation, and the experiences of end users. With these diverse perspectives, ELSA-NN develops practical tools and educational materials that support ethically informed decision-making, legally sound AI-design and the trustworthy and inclusive use of AI in healthcare. ELSA-NN believes that fostering a critical understanding and mindset among AI developers, health care professionals, and citizens is crucial for realising responsible development and implementation of AI in Health.

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Lessons from the field Healthy futures

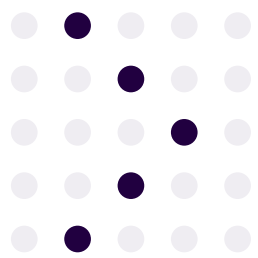
With the *Your Technology of Tomorrow*-educational programme the lab reached a large group of young people – the generation of the future – to learn about responsible AI in a playful and interactive way. This success was made possible by bringing partners from across the network together. The programme helps the next generation develop a critical understanding of responsible AI in healthcare.

At the same time, translating ELSA knowledge into practical guidance remains challenging. Ethical and legal expertise is often difficult to turn into tools that are easy to use in everyday practice. To bridge

From left to right: Sara Roscioni, Frank Schröer, Judith vd Elst, Steven Warmelink, Mieke Bergman, Hilbrand Oldenhuis, Sara Soriano Longaron, Patricia Pita Ferreira. You see members of ELSA-NN playing the card game ‘photo fiasco’ developed by ELSA-NN’s Steven Warmelink, which was developed for the ‘Your Technology of Tomorrow’ educational programme. The game asks you to guess which of the pictures is AI generated and which is real, and is intended to show how difficult Ai it has made to distinguish between fake an real and to discuss what this means for society.



‘Impact is the effects we see, or hope to see, on people or situations.’



More Time for Patients (and Doctors)

Dr. Anne Hoekman, medical doctor,
legal scholar and PhD candidate,
on responsible AI in Healthcare



Your research focuses on generative AI in healthcare. What role does ELSA-NN play in your work?

At the moment, I'm mainly working on ambient listening: technology that listens during consultations and automatically generates medical notes. Together with ELSA-NN, I evaluate how this technology performs in practice from legal, ethical, professional and patient perspectives.

What impact do you hope AI will have on healthcare and how does an ELSA approach help with that?

I hope AI can reduce administrative workload, allowing healthcare professionals to spend more time and attention on their patients. But that impact only

'I hope AI can reduce administrative workload, allowing healthcare professionals to spend more time and attention on their patients. But that impact only matters if the technology is safe, trustworthy and fits naturally into clinical practice.'

matters if the technology is safe, trustworthy and fits naturally into clinical practice. That's where ELSA-NN adds value. The lab brings together patients, healthcare professionals, legal experts, ethicists and researchers to ensure different perspectives are considered from the start.

Has working with ELSA-NN changed the way you do your work?

My involvement with ELSA-NN has strengthened my view that AI implementation should not be evaluated only in terms of technical performance or efficiency. It has made me more aware of the importance of patient information, transparency, trust, and legal responsibilities from the earliest stages of research and implementation.

What are the biggest challenges for AI in healthcare?

One of the key challenges is that the technology is developing faster than clinical practice, regulation and evaluation frameworks can keep up with. Another challenge is that AI tools are often assessed mainly in terms of efficiency, while aspects such as quality, bias, patient-trust, and professional responsibility are just as important.

Can you give an example of ELSA-NN making a difference?

It's a good practice to include ethical, legal and societal perspectives from the start, rather than only evaluating them after the technology has already been developed or implemented. I experienced this during the development of patient information leaflets for AI in healthcare, in collaborating with ELSA-NN's Sara Soriano Longarón. As a stakeholder, I joined the co-creation sessions and discussions about how her public may perceive ambient listening and what information patients need to make informed decisions.

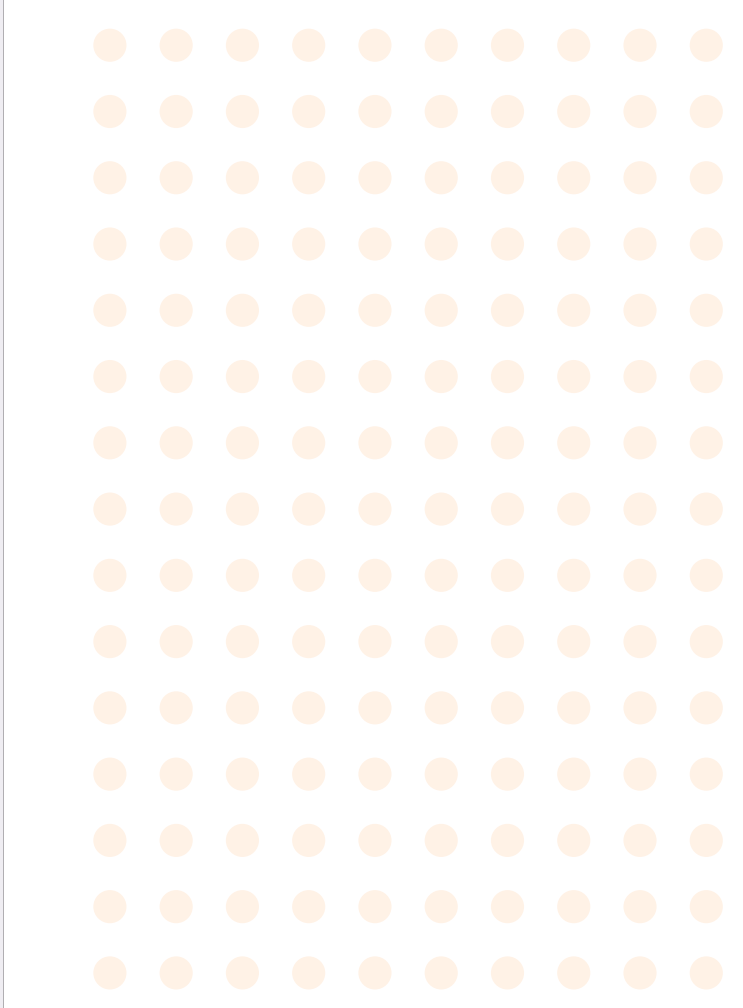
The same applies to the legal paper on ambient listening that I am writing together with ELSA-NN's researcher Jonida Milaj-Weishaar. This collaboration connects clinical practice with legal questions around data protection, liability, medical device regulation, and the roles of healthcare institutions, professionals and technology providers. It has also encouraged me to look beyond technical validation and ask broader ethical, legal and societal questions. For me, that is the real value of collaborating with ELSA-NN: instead of only asking whether the technology works, we also ask whether it is responsible, safe and truly valuable for both healthcare professionals and patients.

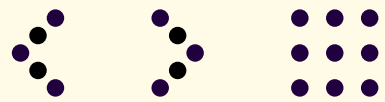


2 AI, Media & Democracy



Just Because We Can?
AI can write headlines, summarise articles, and help shape the information we see every day. But just because we can use these technologies everywhere, doesn't mean we should. The AI, Media & Democracy Lab explores how AI can support media and democracy without compromising the values that make them worth protecting.

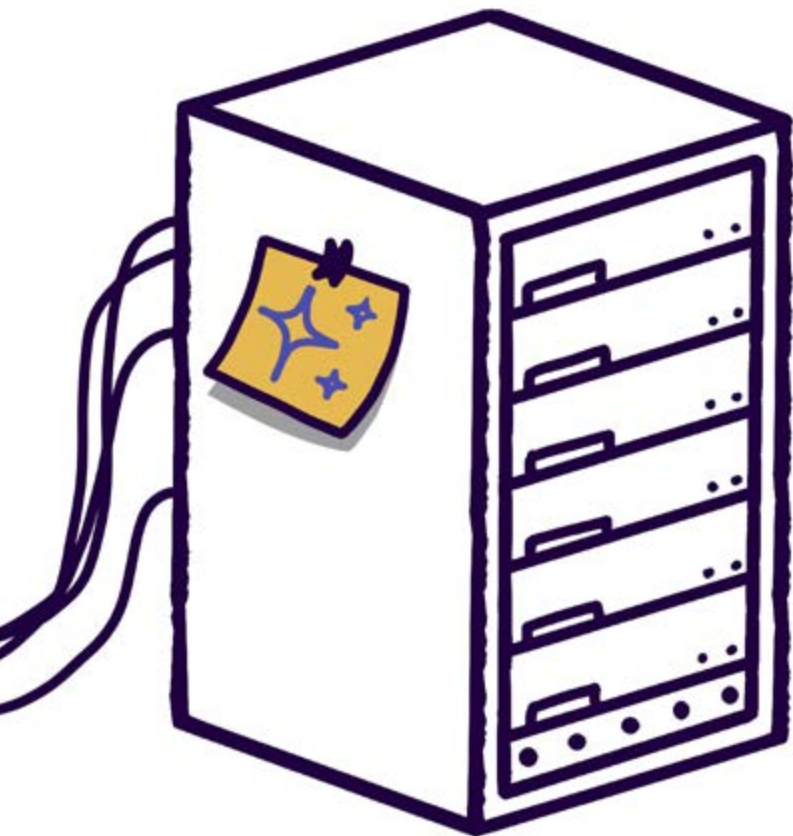




Impact Defined Who’s writing the story?

AI is rapidly changing how information is created, distributed, and consumed. News articles can be summarised in seconds, headlines generated automatically, and content tailored to individual audiences at scale. The question is no longer whether AI belongs in media workflows. It is already there.

For the AI, Media & Democracy Lab (AIMD), impact means helping society make informed choices about these technologies. Just because we can use AI, doesn’t mean we should use it everywhere. What do we gain when algorithms help shape public debate? What do we risk losing? And who remains accountable when decisions that affect our information environment are increasingly influenced by AI?



‘This exchange works both ways: practice informs policy, and policy helps shape responsible and democratic innovation’



By bringing together expertise from media, law, politics, and computer science, the lab helps ensure that innovation does not come at the expense of transparency, independence, and democratic values that underpin Europe’s information landscape.



The ELSA-way From newsroom to policy room

AIMD connects the people who develop, use, regulate, and are affected by AI. By working closely with media organisations, civil society groups, and policymakers, the lab ensures that real-world experiences inform discussions about governance and regulation.

Insights from newsrooms and media professionals help identify emerging challenges, while policymakers help translate those insights into meaningful safeguards.

This exchange works both ways: practice informs policy, and policy helps shape responsible and democratic innovation.

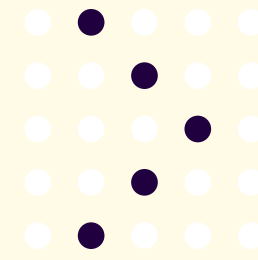


Lessons from the field Making headlines in Strasbourg

One of the clearest examples of the lab’s impact came through its collaboration with the Council of Europe. As generative AI rapidly entered public debate, policymakers need reliable guidance on the opportunities and risks these technologies create for democracy, media, and elections.

Drawing on the expertise developed within the lab, researchers contributed to a report that helped inform discussions at an international policy level. Their insights reached an organisation with the ability to shape legislation, standards, and democratic safeguards across Europe.

It is a clear example of how expertise developed within the lab can travel far beyond academia, helping to shape the rules that govern AI’s role in our information environment.



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Left to right: Sara Spaargaren, Sophie Morosoli, Laurens Naudts, Natali Helberger, Claes de Vreese, Leona Veteleanu, Pooja Prajod, Guillermo Romero Moreno, Manel Slokom





AI as an Ally, Not an Oracle

Boris van Bennekum, Innovations and Data Lead at BNNVARA on building AAVA with the AI, Media & Democracy ELSA Lab

Artificial intelligence is rapidly finding its way into newsrooms, but how do you ensure it strengthens journalism rather than replacing human judgement? Together with the AI, Media & Democracy ELSA Lab, BNNVARA, Omroep Zwart and EO developed the AI Audience Validation Assistant (AAVA): a tool designed to help journalists reflect on how different audiences may perceive their stories. Boris van Bennekum explains why ELSA was crucial for the development of his tool.

How did you end up working with the ELSA Lab?

It started almost by accident. Colleagues from Omroep ZWART and the EO pitched an idea for the AI track at the International Broadcasting Conference (IBC): an AI panel that could predict how different audiences would respond to content. We built ten personas and one visualised avatar. The demo was a hit.

But when our CEO was asked whether we should take it on a European tour, he said no. He felt we lacked substance. ‘We lack substance. It’s not smoke and mirrors, but it’s trinkets – sprinkles on top.’ That refusal became the real starting point.

I met ELSA Lab manager Sara Spaargaren on the IBC demo floor. She insisted we should meet and that conversation transformed the idea into an actual newsroom tool: AAVA, funded by the Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek and NPO innovation funding.

Can you give an example of the work you’ve done with the ELSA Lab?

We trained the tool to recognise when content might not resonate with specific communities, like Indonesian audiences. That required reaching people that the standard research panel couldn’t provide. By design, we’re trying to make people heard who are often not heard or not seen.

What difference did working with the ELSA Lab make?

I think we would have stopped without it. Where else would I find a data scientist actually doing a PhD, or someone with such deep expertise in ethics? That’s the stuff that normally gets pushed to the bottom of my priority list. The collaboration deepened and accelerated our learning, even if we had to learn to navigate the different working ways. The academic perspective made it a much richer project for everyone involved.

Why does this impact matter to you?

A newsroom is a place where we need to get things extra, super, especially right. Public media play an essential role in society and in holding power to account.

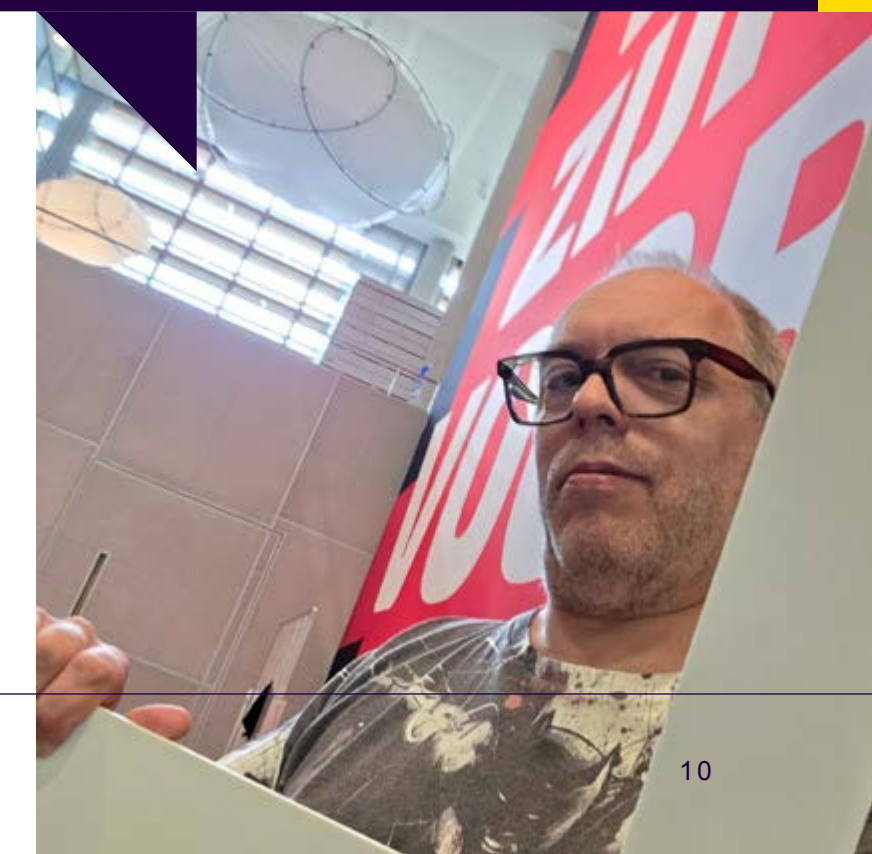
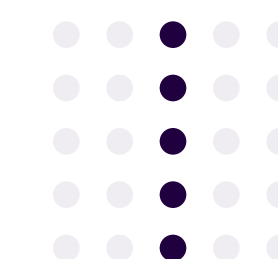
Is there a moment that captures what this project has been like?

At one of our last team meetings, two journalists declined an invitation because they believed AI should not be used at all. Instead of ignoring their response, I asked if we could anonymise their email and put it on a slide to start a discussion.

We’re not standing there saying we got it completely right, we’re trying to adapt and learn how we can do things better. That kind of attitude towards your audience – that is golden.

‘The academic perspective made it a much richer project for everyone involved’

Boris van Bennekum





The annual ELSA Network Day 2026, hosted this year by the AI, Media & Democracy Lab in Amsterdam, brought together researchers from ELSA Labs across the Netherlands. They shared lessons learned from a year of advancing the ethical, legal and societal aspects of AI. The day was filled with discussions, knowledge exchange and updates from each participating Lab, all centred around this year's theme: impact.

Participants of the ELSA Labs Network Day 2026, at the AI, Media and Democracy Lab in Amsterdam

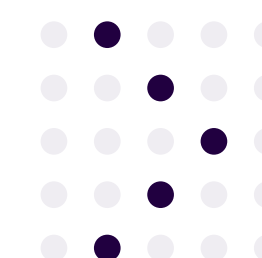
Images ELSA Network day by Evelien Hogers

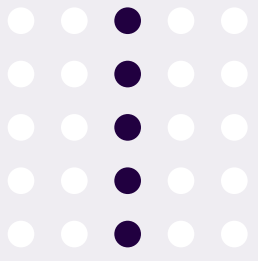


About Impact

Amsterdam, February 10 2026

Ask a room full of ELSA researchers what impact means, and you get more typical answers like 'trust,' 'change,' and 'society', but also smaller, less common answers: 'implementation', 'awareness', 'someone read what I wrote'. Those last ones show the value of the ELSA Network Day: creating a space in which the typical and the less common ideas can be brought together and discussed.





But it had no tidy conclusion. In one roundtable, the ELSA community sketched out what an ‘ideal ELSA researcher’ looks like: head, heart, and hands working together (see photo on the top right), critical thinking paired with care and a willingness to actually do something. In another, ELSA researchers discuss how hard it is to protect space for creative, interdisciplinary work inside a system that wants measurable output on a fixed timeline. Impact, someone said, needs room to ferment. A number of labs shared how they are experimenting with a [quintuple helix methodology](#), whereby the fifth helix is nature/sustainability. This added dimension created further food for thought on how to define and measure impact, if the intended participant and recipient (nature/the environment) cannot speak in ways we currently understand or value.

The conversation on stakeholders reframed things too: impact isn’t just delivered to people, it’s built with them, and it has to be reported back. And the session on failure was perhaps the hardest but most valuable: how rarely can academics and professionals talk openly about what didn’t work, and how much rigour there actually is in admitting that.

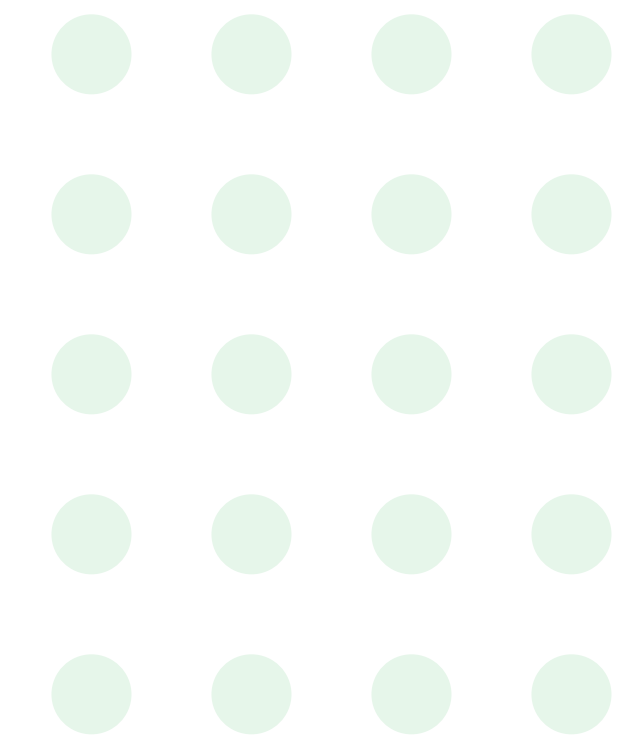
By the afternoon, when each lab shared what they’d actually built – from NATO conversations to a card game teaching kids to spot AI-generated images – the abstract question from the morning became more tangible. There is still no single definition of impact, as you can see in more detail on [page 24](#). ‘Trust’, ‘Change’, and ‘Society’ aren’t destinations, but they remind us of the right way.

The quintuple helix methodology



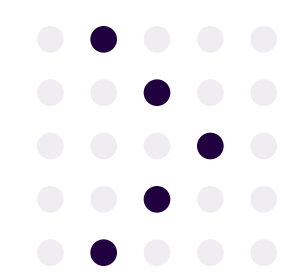


3 Defence



The Rules of AI Engagement

From AI-assisted decision-making to autonomous systems, artificial intelligence is reshaping the defence domain. But how do we ensure these innovations remain ethical, lawful and accountable? Together with its consortium partners, ELSA Lab Defence is developing a future-proof, independent and consultative ecosystem for the responsible use of AI within the defence domain.





Impact Defined

Mission objective

For ELSA Lab Defence, impact means helping every stakeholder involved in military AI systems make legally, ethically and socially responsible decisions throughout the design, acquisition and deployment of those systems. The lab’s Compliance Risk Framework translates abstract principles from International Humanitarian Law into practical, system-specific criteria. This enables defence organisations and industry partners to make more informed choices, improve transparency and accountability and better assess when and under what circumstances AI systems can be used responsibly. By creating a shared vocabulary, the framework also enables legal, technical and operational experts to evaluate AI systems using the same factual assumptions.

within existing defence and procurement processes. Together, they help users understand how technical, operational, environmental, human and institutional factors interact, how those interactions affect legal compliance, and where potential risks arise.

The toolkit helps legal review officers, acquisition officials, commanders, operators, and industry developers address legal and ethical considerations throughout the AI lifecycle. It supports them in defining legally sensitive requirements, conducting legal reviews, and integrating compliance and civilian harm mitigation into the design, configuration, and deployment of AI systems. Workshops and training sessions help stakeholders apply the framework in practice, creating a shared language for discussing responsible military AI across organisations and disciplines.



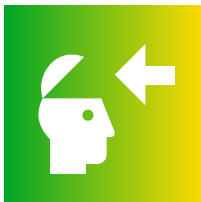
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The ELSA-way

Shared Intelligence

Responsible AI requires more than technological expertise. Lawyers, engineers, acquisition officials, commanders and industry developers all play a role in how AI is designed and deployed. ELSA Lab Defence brings these different perspectives together. The lab develops a practical framework and toolkit that fit



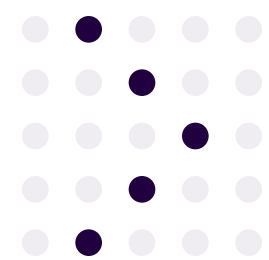
Lessons from the field

Field report

Stakeholder involvement has been central to the project from the very beginning. The framework is developed together with defence organisations and industry partners to ensure it reflects their practical needs and can be integrated into everyday decision-making. Yet building these partnerships is not always

straightforward. The MoD and industry are traditionally difficult to access, making collaboration both *essential* and *challenging*.

Nevertheless, the framework has already attracted strong interest during workshops, conferences and events, with positive feedback from both European and non-European stakeholders. Ultimately, the project’s impact will be measured by whether organisations feel confident using the framework to make more transparent, accountable and responsible decisions about military AI.

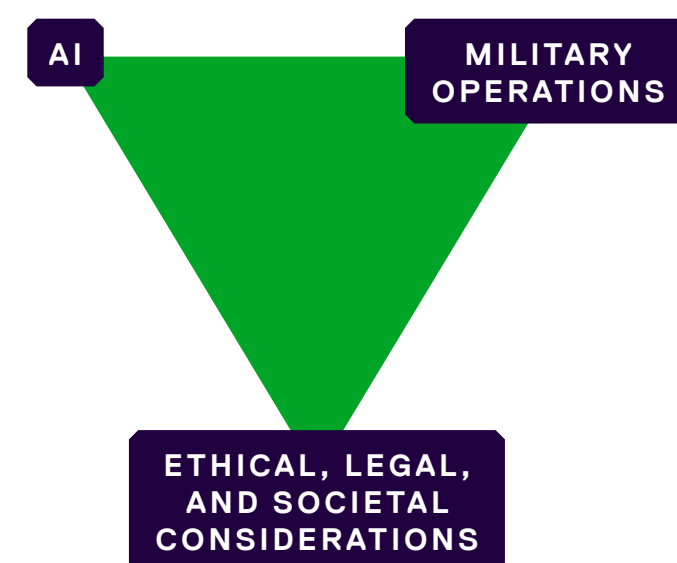


Lost in translation



Dr. Jonathan Kwik, legal researcher at ELSA Lab Defence, on bridging the gap between AI, military practice and society.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming part of military decision-making. But responsible AI requires more than advanced technology. It requires people who know how to use it responsibly. Drawing on a background in law, computer science and military practice, Dr. Jonathan Kwik helps turn complex legal, ethical and technical principles into practical guidance for those developing and using AI in defence.



Why does this work matter now?

When I started my PhD, AI in defence was still largely theoretical. Today it's almost impossible to imagine military operations without it. AI is increasingly used to analyse vast amounts of information, anticipate developments and support decision-making. As these systems become part of everyday practice, organisations urgently need guidance on how to use them responsibly. It's almost a triangle: AI, military operations, and the legal, ethical and societal

considerations. The biggest challenge is translating between those worlds so that end users – whether diplomats, commanders or AI developers – can actually apply that knowledge.

Can you give an example of that translation work?

In our first year, we built a methodology to map the ethical, legal and societal norms stakeholders need

to consider. The field is fragmented and confusing otherwise. Now I'm leading a toolkit built around 'variables': things like training data quality, bias risk, false-positive rates and how closely you've worked with the developer.

We don't hand people an answer. We teach them what to consider and why, in plain language, with an interactive version planned online.

Rather than prescribing what users should do, the toolkit helps them ask better questions and understand how different factors influence responsible decision-making. The aim is not to replace human judgement, but to strengthen it.

The same principle applies when working with the industry. You don't lecture companies about legal obligations. Instead, you explain that their customer has already committed to these principles. If they ignore them during development, a competitor who does take them into account will have a competitive advantage.

What happens without an ELSA Lab?

Our surveys confirm it's the biggest issue stakeholders raise: they genuinely want to act legally, ethically and in a societally acceptable way, but they simply don't know where to look. Our added value is

bringing everything together and translating complex legal, ethical and technical knowledge into practical guidance that people can actually use.

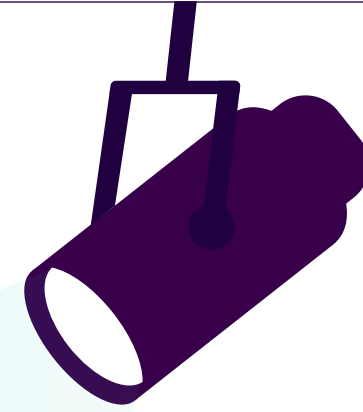
How does that benefit society as a whole?

Responsible use of AI also depends on public trust. You can argue that something is legally and ethically acceptable, but you also have to ask whether society accepts it. By helping governments, industry and defence organisations make transparent and well-informed decisions, we contribute to democratic accountability around the use of AI in defence.

What kind of impact do you hope will remain after the project ends?

I hope we leave behind something that stays useful, even as AI continues to evolve. We don't want to build a tool that only works for today's systems. We want to teach stakeholders how to think. If people understand which questions to ask, they can continue making responsible decisions long after the project itself has ended.

ELSA on stage



A critical reflection on the importance of ethics and law for making lasting impact

Bringing together different disciplines is easier said than done. Simply placing experts from different backgrounds on the same stage does not necessarily result in an award-winning play. Yet this is precisely the challenge at the heart of the ELSA approach, one of the instruments helping to realise the human-centric AI that Europe strongly advocates.

Ethics and law are protagonists, rather than antagonists.

Within ELSA projects, ethical and legal considerations are often treated as interchangeable, even though ethics and law are not cast to play the same role. Making an impact depends on recognising the different responsibilities that ethics, law, governance, and technology each bring to the performance.

Who plays which role?

Ethics creates the conceptual and societal space to ask difficult questions before clear legal answers exist. It allows researchers, developers, policymakers, and citizens to articulate concerns, explore values, and identify emerging risks that may still fall outside existing legal categories. In rapidly evolving AI ecosystems, ethics functions as an exploratory and anticipatory practice.

Law and governance, by contrast, are classificatory, institutional, and enforceable. They establish obligations, accountability structures, oversight mechanisms, and procedural safeguards. Ethical reflection alone cannot provide the legal certainty and institutional clarity required in practice.

The European script

As outlined in the EU Trustworthy AI Framework, AI should be lawful, ethical, and robust. It should serve and remain under human control, contribute to a flourishing democratic society, uphold human dignity, and protect the environment.

The ELSA approach is one of the instruments helping to translate these ambitions into practice. But realising human-centric AI requires more than bringing different disciplines together. It requires understanding how their distinct perspectives complement one another.

The grand finale

In the grand finale, as AI applications transition from experimentation to implementation, the relationship between ethics and law undergoes a significant shift. Where law provides the director's guidelines and script, how those are interpreted and performed should be informed by ethics. After all, a compelling performance is not merely about accurately saying your lines; it is about understanding the meaning behind the message across contexts.

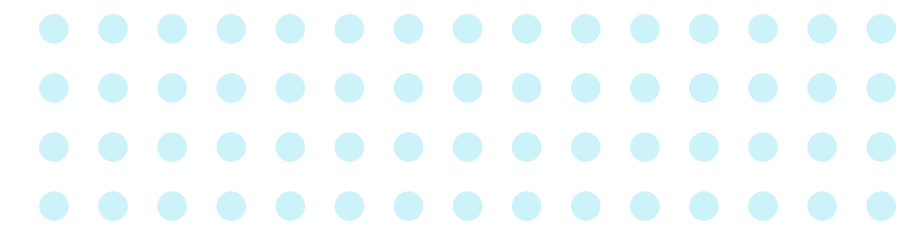
Ethics and law are protagonists, rather than antagonists. They should not compete, but work together constructively to bring the ELSA play to a higher level. It is in their underlying chemistry that the true promise of responsible AI innovation lies.

By **Esther Keymolen**, professor in Digital Technology Regulation with a focus on philosophy and ethics. Esther is also the head of Tilburg Institute for Law, Technology and Society (TILT) in the Netherlands.



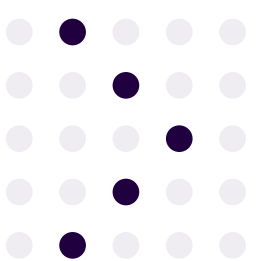
Contact Esther

E.L.O.Keymolen@tilburguniversity.edu



A Seat at the Table

What makes a food system truly sustainable? At the AI4SFS (AI for Sustainable Food Systems) ELSA Lab, we challenge how sustainability is defined and bring diverse perspectives into AI innovation. The lab helps measure the real-world impact of ELSA in sustainable food systems, starting with the basics of what sustainability means in this context.



AI for Sustainable Food Systems
Ethical, Legal, Societal Aspects

4 AI 4 Sustainable Food Systems



Impact Defined Shared dining

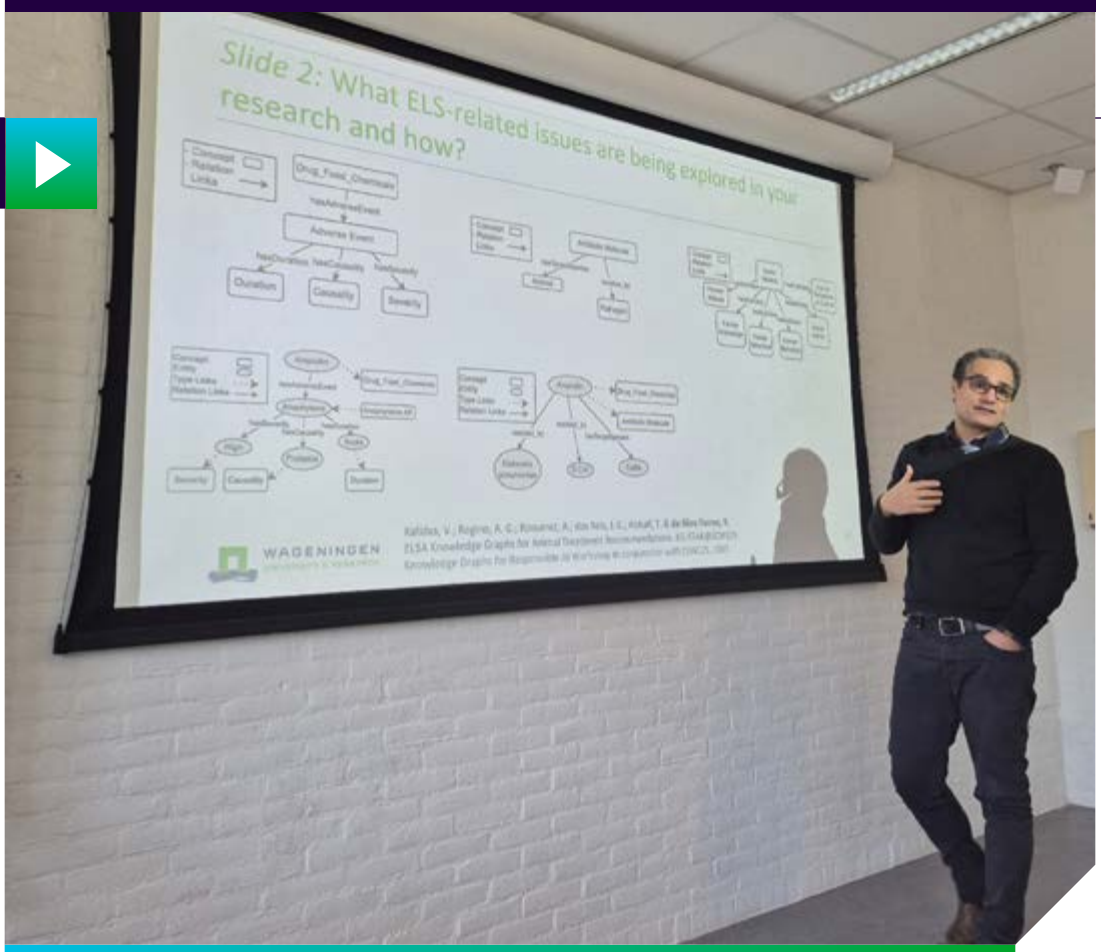
Making food systems more sustainable is a shared societal goal. Yet impact is often understood as translating research into tangible societal benefits. At AI4SFS, we believe impact starts much earlier. Before AI can contribute to sustainable food systems, we first need to ask what sustainability actually means and whose perspectives shape that definition. By embedding different perspectives and ELSA aspects from the outset, the lab helps ensure AI innovations contribute to food systems that are not only environmentally sound, but also socially responsible and economically viable.



The ELSA-way Who's coming to supper?

One of the lab's main goals is to broaden participation in AI development. While the quadruple helix approach brings together researchers, industry, policymakers and civil society, environmental interests are often represented only indirectly. AI4SFS therefore explores new ways to include environmental perspectives alongside a wider diversity of public voices in ELSA processes. By bringing more voices to the table, the lab develops a richer and more robust understanding of what sustainable food systems should look like.

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Professor Ricardo da Silva Torres (Artificial Intelligence) presenting to the AI4SFS ELSA Lab team, January 2026

'Making food systems more sustainable is a shared societal goal'

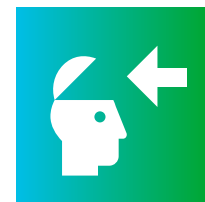
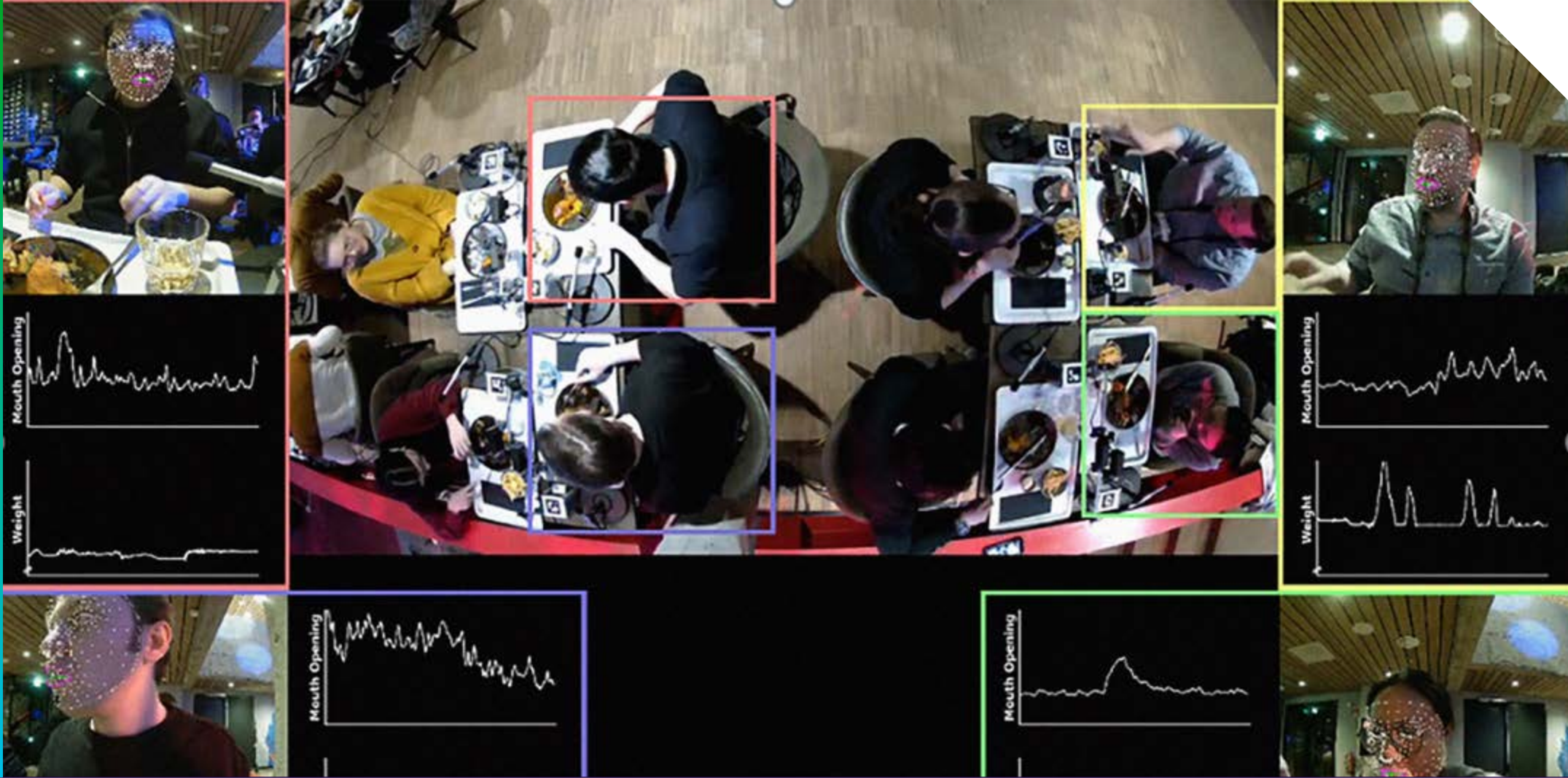
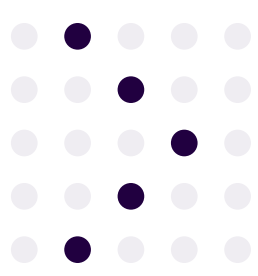
This conceptual shift lays the foundation for **instrumental impact**. Clearer definitions, stronger evidence and closer collaboration lead to better-informed decisions and AI technologies that are more ethically, socially and environmentally aligned.

A third type of impact is **capacity building**. AI4SFS equips researchers, technologists and other stakeholders with the skills and tools to integrate ethical, legal and societal considerations into their work. Ultimately, a successful ELSA Lab is almost invisible. It shapes debates, decision-making and the design of new technologies by making ethical, legal and societal considerations a natural part of research and innovation. This type of impact is difficult to measure, but it is essential for shaping sustainable food systems for years to come.

READ MORE



Read more about the lab's research on defining sustainability and conceptual impact.



Lessons from the field Three-way impact

AI4SFS creates impact in three complementary ways. First, the lab contributes to **conceptual impact**, which has fundamental effects, as it alters how people think and debate issues – like sustainability. By encouraging scientists to define their terminology more carefully and support sustainability claims with meaningful evidence, the lab strengthens both scientific debate and collaboration.

Leave Room to Learn

What makes research truly impactful? Prof. Rachel Ankeny believes the answer starts long before the results are in. As Chair of Philosophy at Wageningen University & Research and lead of the AI4SFS ELSA Lab, she shares why asking better questions, embracing reflection and leaving room for learning are essential ingredients for responsible AI innovation.



You have worked in both Australia and the Netherlands. Has that changed the way you think about research impact?

I’ve been fortunate to work in two research systems that both place a strong emphasis on societal impact. In Australia, however, the conversation has gradually shifted away from counting publications or patents towards understanding how research creates change in specific contexts. That resonates strongly with ELSA. I’m not saying that impact is possible without excellent research at its core. But excellent research isn’t just about theory. It also means asking what your work can actually achieve and creating tools or approaches that people can use in practice.

ELSA Labs often don’t produce patents or products. How do you demonstrate impact?

That’s one of our biggest challenges. Most ELSA research comes from the humanities and social sciences, where impact rarely takes the form of a commercial product. Instead, our contribution may be

changing how researchers think about sustainability, how policymakers frame a problem or how different stakeholders collaborate. Those kinds of outcomes often take much longer to emerge, which makes them harder to measure. That’s why it’s so important that project teams agree early on what meaningful impact looks like.

Your lab brings together researchers from very different disciplines. Does that make defining impact even more difficult?

It certainly does. Everyone enters a project with different expectations and different ideas about success. Some researchers have extensive experience working with societal partners, while others come from more theoretical backgrounds. Creating space for conversations about this is essential. Only when everyone develops a shared understanding of impact can you also develop meaningful ways of measuring it.

What do you hope AI4SFS will achieve in the coming years?

I hope the lab becomes a place where researchers feel comfortable reflecting on their own work and adapting their approach as new insights emerge. Research shouldn’t be locked into what was written in a grant

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proposal years earlier. If we learn something new, we should be willing to change course.

The ultimate ambition is to take what we learn beyond this lab. We want to contribute to broader European discussions on AI in agriculture, agricultural data, open science and trust in science and technology. If the tools we develop help others make AI more responsible, then we’ve achieved something that extends well beyond our own projects.

‘If we learn something new, we should be willing to change course’

From Brussels with Love

Hans de Canck, Founder of and advisor to FARI in Brussels, on working with ELSA across the border and what responsible AI needs next.

How did you come to be doing something similar to the ELSA Labs in Brussels?

In 2019, Caroline Pauwels, then rector of Vrije Universiteit Brussel, asked me to help establish a new institute together with the French-speaking Université libre de Bruxelles. We started with little more than a tagline: 'AI for the common good'. Despite the vision and appealing ambition, it took us 2 years to develop a clear operational model and required funding for the institute. FARI officially launched in 2021. From the start, its role was to bring together the different actors involved in responsible AI: researchers, citizens, public authorities and industry. Connecting with the ELSA Lab initiative therefore felt natural. The Dutch approach recognised early on that social scientists,

legal scholars and humanities researchers need to be involved from the beginning, rather than added once the technology has already been developed.

How have you seen the ELSA Labs evolve from across the border?

One of the clearest developments is that the Labs have become increasingly focused on specific themes and sectors. With every new call, they have moved closer to contexts in which AI can create tangible societal impact. At the same time, a gap remains. After four or five years, many technical researchers know that the ELSA Labs exist, but they still find it difficult to explain what working with them means in practice. The next step is therefore not only to make ELSA visible, but to make collaboration more concrete and accessible.

What does impact mean in responsible AI?

As we know, it is not easy to develop and create trust, as well as to maintain this. Therefore developing 'translation' models or interfaces like ELSA is hard work, that is never done, yet central to achieving impact. Engineers, ethicists, lawyers and social scientists all speak different professional languages. The same is true for public authorities, companies and citizens. Someone needs to help these diverse groups understand one another and turn their different

perspectives into shared decisions. That interface of ELSA creates transparency and transparency helps build trust. This is not only socially important, but economically relevant as well. Investors and organisations increasingly want solutions they can understand and follow. They are looking for a 'white box', rather than a black box whose decisions cannot be explained.

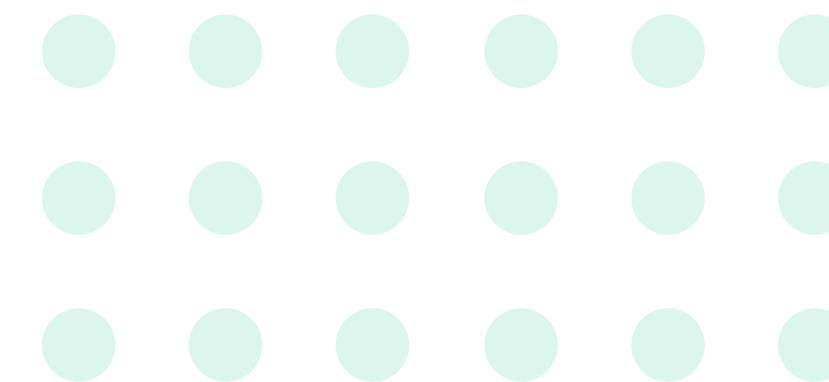
Is there an aspect of impact that receives too little attention?

Vocational and professional training. Much of the debate focuses on educating the next generation of computer scientists. But there is also a major need among people who are already working with or managing AI in practice. Think of a manager in their forties who suddenly has to decide how AI should be used within a team or organisation. They need a practical AI competence model that is tailored to their

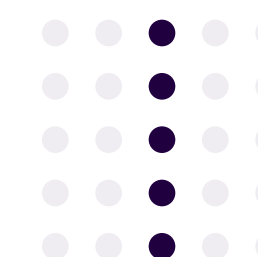
sector. AI literacy should therefore not be limited to technical specialists or future graduates; it needs to reach the people making decisions today.

How do you view the future of ELSA and responsible AI?

I'm a techno-optimist, not a techno-solutionist. I believe AI will ultimately strengthen society and democracy, even with today's negative swing. And I expect health to be where the biggest, broadest impact lands. But nothing about that is guaranteed just because you've had impact before. Institutes like FARI and the ELSA Labs have to keep fighting for their own existence. You have to stay innovative, adapt and willing to kill your darlings.

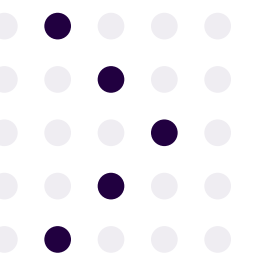
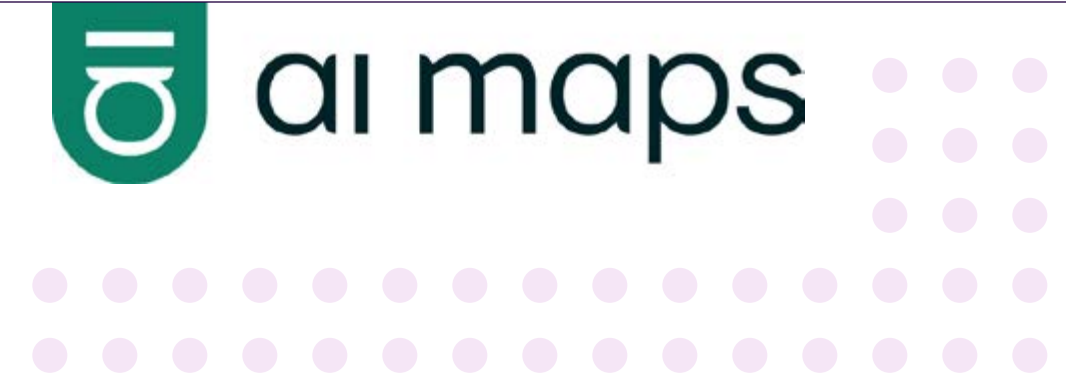


'After four or five years, many technical researchers know that the ELSA Labs exist, but they still find it difficult to explain what working with them means in practice.'





5 AI Multi-Agency Public Safety Issues



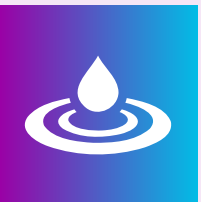
Rethinking Safety for Good

Who gets to decide what makes a neighbourhood safe? At AI-MAPS, impact starts with that question. By bringing local perspectives into conversations about AI and public safety research, the lab creates solutions that reflect what communities actually need. The result is a broader understanding of safety, one that values trust, social cohesion, and nature in the neighbourhood alongside security.





‘Seeing how many people in the neighbourhood handle nature and the neighbourhood with awareness – that you cannot just dump trash there, but also can make a garden of it – made an impact on me. I just want to take that with me.’ – Orsine



Impact Defined

The missing half of safety

A crime statistic can tell you what happened in a neighbourhood. A resident who has spent twenty years navigating a neighbourhood understands something that no study can fully capture. For AI MAPS, making impact starts with recognising that both forms of knowing matter. We zoom in on the details of a specific street, neighbourhood, or community, while also zooming out to understand what these experiences reveal about public safety more broadly.

That changes how we think about public safety. The term often evokes crime rates, surveillance, and enforcement. But for many residents, safety is just as much about knowing your neighbours, caring for shared spaces, and feeling that you belong. When those experiences are left out of the conversation, we risk solving the wrong problem.

For AI MAPS, impact means giving meaningful weight to the voices that rarely make it into policy and research discussions. By bringing lived experience into the equation, AI MAPS helps create a fuller picture of what safer communities actually look like.



The ELSA-way

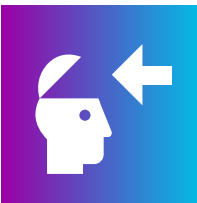
From street level to systems

Working with communities requires trust. That takes longer to build than most research projects account for. Rather than arriving in a community with fixed questions and leaving with data, we invest in relationships first, accepting that the research may take us in unexpected directions.

In practice, this means being genuinely participatory. Researchers from legal, ethical, social and technical disciplines work alongside companies, NGOs, public officials and residents in regular team meetings. The aim is mutual learning: sharing knowledge, listening

carefully, and allowing community priorities to shape the research agenda.

Our work often starts with something concrete: a neighbourhood event, a specific technology, or a concrete situation. We start there, then pull outward, asking what this tells us about deeper structures. Equally important is to question the frameworks themselves. We ask not just how safety is currently managed, but whether the underlying assumptions still hold.



Lessons from the field

The safest bombs in town

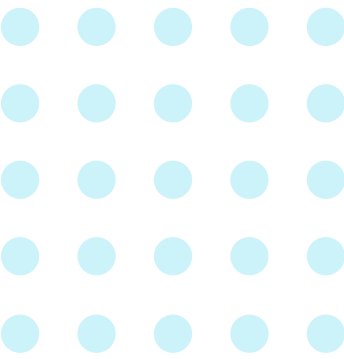
When the AI MAPS team began working in Rotterdam’s Lombardijen neighbourhood, residents were not particularly concerned about cameras or surveillance technologies. Instead, they spoke about litter, neglected public spaces, and the feeling that nobody in authority cared about the neighbourhood’s green spaces. These were not the issues the research had originally set out to explore.

Gradually, the focus shifted from negative to positive safety. Rather than defining safety through surveillance or crime prevention alone, we let the community tell us what mattered. Social cohesion, green spaces, and a sense of belonging moved to the centre of the research.

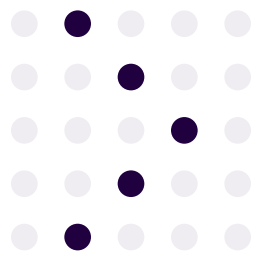
The impact was visible not only in the research itself, but also in the activities that followed. After residents repeatedly highlighted the importance of greenery, the team organised a community event where participants created flower seed bombs together.

The residents’ reflections capture the impact better than any research report could.

‘These activities help me to become more consciously engaged with the greenery and the safety.’ – Jenny



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INTERVIEW WITH JAN SPIJKERMAN

It's a Way of Thinking

Jan Spijkerman on ethics, transparency, and AI at the Dutch Police

Jan Spijkerman spent his career in the Dutch National Police, working on forensics and human trafficking from Rotterdam to the NATO summit, before retiring last July. He now volunteers as a practice supervisor to PhD students at AI MAPS, mentoring the next generation of researchers on the ground. We spoke with him about what ethical AI really looks like in the field, and why he thinks the work of AI MAPS is far from done.



You've worked across some of the highest-pressure environments in Dutch policing. How did you come to work with AI MAPS?

Throughout my career, I was involved in pilots in areas like forensics, human trafficking and many other fields. But there was one principle I always tried to follow: when you have something new, invite journalists, invite Amnesty International. Transparency is very important in a democracy. When I came across the ELSA framework it felt like a natural fit with the way I had always tried to work.

How does having AI MAPS involved actually change the way police pilots are run?

It brings a different perspective and that's what matters. On the street, when situations become difficult, people naturally fall back on what they've been trained to do. The ELSA approach challenges that way of doing.

One of the most interesting workshops we organised took place during an Extinction Rebellion demonstration, involving around 350 police officers. The AI MAPS researchers expected to study AI tools and drones, while the demonstrators expected to be monitored by AI. In reality, we weren't using

AI. Instead, we used ELSA methods to study the interactions between police and protestors. The conclusion was that the ELSA approach is valuable even when no AI tools are involved. It's a very valuable *way of thinking*.

What about the situations where AI is involved, such as cybercrime?

Cybercrime is not only growing, it's growing beyond our imagination. All cybercrime is AI-enabled and the only way to combat that is by using AI ourselves. But we don't have enough expertise within the police to develop all those tools internally, so we work with private organisations. That immediately raises new questions.

We cannot share police data with private organisations. So how do you train a model that requires police data when using police data for that purpose isn't permitted? AI MAPS organised a workshop on the issue. We didn't find the ultimate solution, but they provided us with a framework for thinking it through.

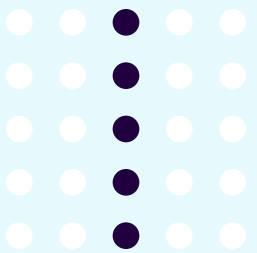
'One of the most interesting workshops we organised took place during an Extinction Rebellion demonstration, involving around 350 police officers.'

What's your biggest concern as AI MAPS approaches the end of its funding?

That's my main concern: how do we preserve the knowledge? When AI MAPS ends next year, Gabriele [red.: Gabriele Jacobs, PI of AI MAPS] and the PhD students will move on. We'll have valuable reports, but with them leaves their living knowledge. I'd love for AI MAPS to run one final campaign: training police employees in the ELSA framework so it can actually be sustained. Good communication, starting months in advance, would be essential.

Looking further ahead, what would you wish for?

I'm an optimist by nature. But some developments do worry me. We need more ELSA thinking in our society, always keeping the ethical, legal and social aspects of these technologies in mind. Back to basics, really: before we ask what AI can do, we should always ask what it *should* do; that means putting one foot in front of the other rather than leaping into AI headfirst. It starts with being transparent about how and why we use AI, and what the impact is and should be.





A Shared Lens on Impact

This is the fourth edition of the ELSA Magazine. In each edition, we have placed the spotlight on a different aspect of the ELSA Labs: from the methodologies and processes at the heart of their work to the people who make meaningful collaboration possible. This year, we zoom out to consider the bigger question behind these efforts: why are we doing this, and what change do we hope to create? As Mirjam explains in her [welcome](#), impact is ultimately about the difference our work makes.

LEONIE TRUTSCHLER, COORDINATOR ELSA IMPACT MAGAZINE

What has changed because the ELSA Labs were there? And is there a distinctive form of ELSA impact that can be recognised across the different Labs, sectors and collaborations?

What emerges is not one shared outcome, but a shared way of looking at the world. Jan Spijkerman of **AI MAPS** describes it as a counterweight to concerning developments in society: ‘more ELSA thinking in our society, always keeping the ethical, legal and social aspects of these technologies in mind’. ELSA thinking does not provide a ready-made answer. It offers a lens that directs attention: showing us where to look, which questions to ask and what might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Minou van der Werf of **Poverty and Debt** approaches this from the perspective of systems thinking. The most valuable outcomes are not always finished products, but insights that reveal how challenges arise, which actors and mechanisms shape them, and how changes in one part of a system affect the rest. From this perspective, ELSA impact can also be found in bringing previously invisible relationships, assumptions and consequences into view.

ELSA MAGAZINE 2



ELSA MAGAZINE 3



Complex systems such as healthcare, mobility and public services can be influenced in many different ways. In this edition, each Lab highlights one concrete example of the change it aims to create, from shifting perspectives and improving collaboration to developing new tools, practices or policies.

The infographic on the next page brings these examples together and shows the different forms that ELSA impact can take.

‘What emerges is not one shared outcome, but a shared way of looking at the world.’





AI-MAPS

Core concept
Representation

Impact means
Ensuring the right voices are heard.

AI, Media & Democracy

Core concept
Democratic resilience

Impact means
Ensuring AI choices serve informed citizens and democratic debate



Poverty & Debt

Core concept
Interconnectedness

Impact means
Understanding how actions ripple through a wider system.

AI4SFS

Core concept
Pluralistic approach to sustainability

Impact means
Creating a clearer and pluralistic understanding of sustainability for technological and agricultural purposes.



ELSA-NN

Core concept
Trust

Impact means
Creating inclusive health-AI patients can trust.

Impact is Not One Thing

But all labs agree that impact means change

Find here a snapshot of some of the changes each lab is working towards.



Defence

Core concept
Accountability

Impact means
Ensuring AI-enabled defence decisions remain transparent, reviewable, and aligned with legal and ethical obligations



Mobility DesAlign

Core concept
Liveability

Impact means
Creating mobility systems that make cities more accessible, sustainable, and pleasant to live in.



AI for Health Equity

Core concept
Equity

Impact means
Ensuring everyone has a fair opportunity to benefit from AI-driven healthcare.



ELSA4TI

Core concept
Responsible adoption/ equity

Impact means
Ensuring AI can be adopted fairly, responsibly and effectively across the entire technical industry.



Decision Support

Core concept
Trust

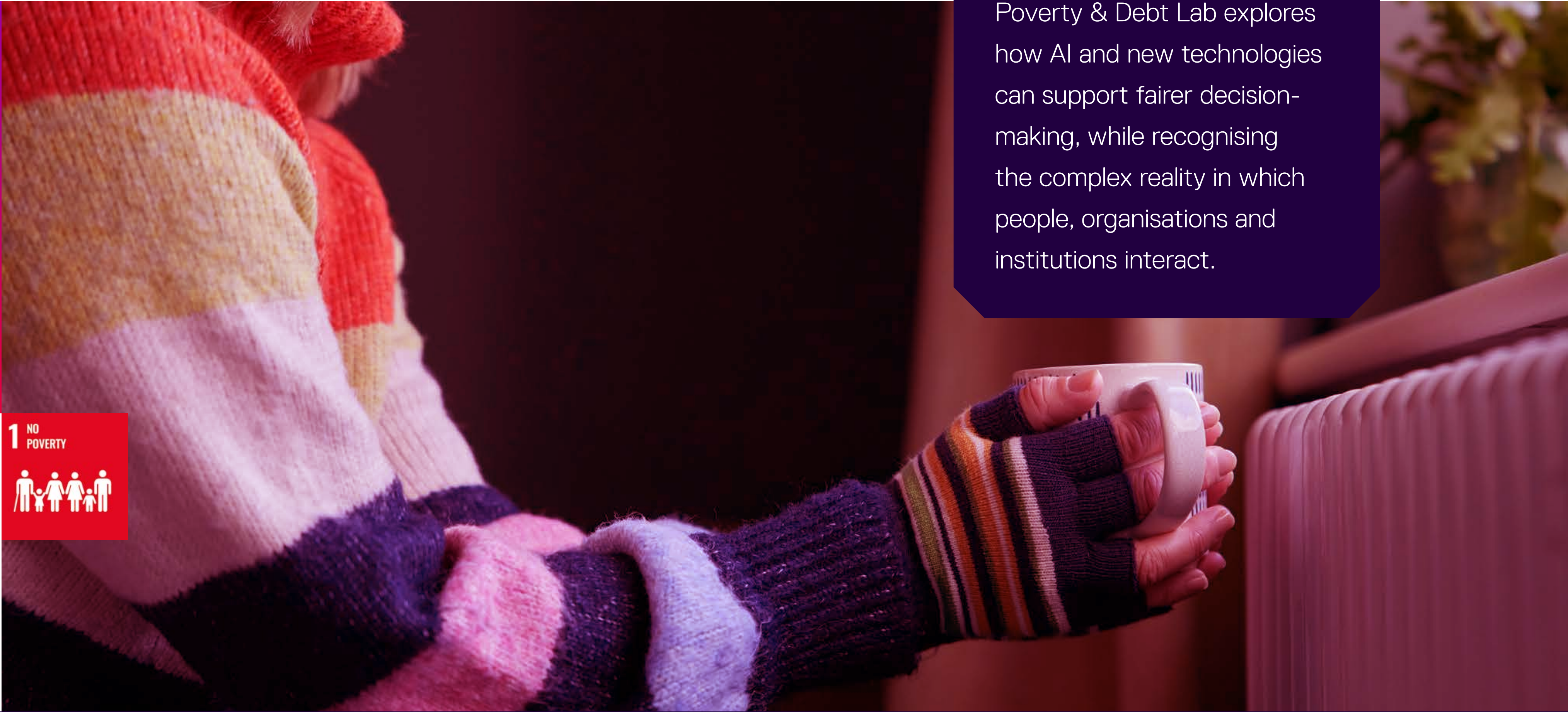
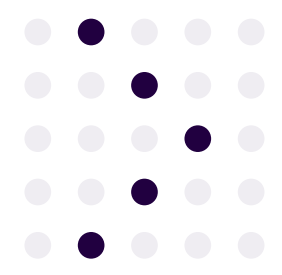
Impact means
Ensuring AI deserves the confidence placed in it.



6 Poverty and Debt

Beyond the Numbers

Poverty and debt are rarely caused by a single problem, and they are rarely solved by a single intervention. The Poverty & Debt Lab explores how AI and new technologies can support fairer decision-making, while recognising the complex reality in which people, organisations and institutions interact.





Impact defined A positive ripple effect

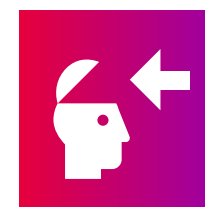
Traditional measures of impact often focus on predefined outcomes: the number of people reached, a policy change, or a completed intervention. While these indicators are valuable, they rarely tell the whole story. For the Poverty & Debt Lab, impact means system thinking. It is about creating sustainable change in how actors, institutions and communities interact with AI within the poverty and debt ecosystem. Rather than focusing on a short-term target, the Lab aims to improve the entire system, committing to changes that are not only effective today, but also create positive ripple effects for long-term societal change.



The ELSA way Welcoming the unintended

Addressing poverty and debt requires more than a single solution. It requires understanding the relationships between people, organisations, technologies, and policies. P&D works closely with municipalities and other stakeholders to strengthen AI literacy, support ethical decision-making, and identify risks related to data quality, intervention design,

and algorithmic bias. Rather than delivering one-off solutions, we aim to build lasting capabilities and networks. By mapping connections and identifying potential unintended consequences, organisations are better equipped to make decisions that are reflective, inclusive, and sustainable. In this way, impact emerges through learning, collaboration and institutional change.



Proof of impact What the numbers miss

Systemic change is not always easy to measure. Shifts in organisational culture, collaboration, or decision-making often happen gradually and may not immediately appear in traditional impact metrics. Yet the signs are there. Municipalities increasingly recognise the importance of AI literacy and ethical reflection when developing data-driven interventions. Interest in cross-municipality learning is growing, allowing organisations to share experiences and avoid repeating common pitfalls. And more organisations are finding their way to the lab. Their growing interest suggests that the ELSA approach is helping create the conditions for more thoughtful, responsible, and sustainable use of AI in addressing poverty and debt.

INTERVIEW WITH MINOU VAN DER WERF

Same Questions, Different Cities

Minou van der Werf on bringing cities together through ELSA.



Minou van der Werf is Assistant Professor at BISS, an institute of Maastricht University, and a member of the ELSA Lab Poverty & Debt. Within the lab, she initiated a community of municipalities that comes together twice a year to foster connection and knowledge sharing.

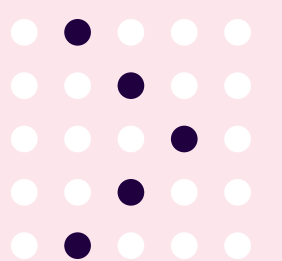
Municipalities across the Netherlands are increasingly exploring the use of AI in areas such as debt prevention, social support, and public services. But with these opportunities come important questions about ethics, fairness, and accountability. Through the ELSA Lab Poverty & Debt, Minou van der Werf is helping municipalities navigate these challenges together. 'Many municipalities think they're facing a unique challenge. Most discover they're not.'



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What does impact mean to you?

'For me, impact is not only about developing new knowledge or technologies. It is about creating lasting changes in how organisations make decisions and collaborate.'



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Many of the challenges surrounding poverty, debt, and AI are interconnected and cannot be solved by a single organisation acting alone. The ELSA Lab can contribute by helping municipalities develop AI solutions that are not only technically effective, but also ethically sound, legally compliant, and socially responsible. If we can help public organisations better anticipate unintended consequences and make more informed choices, that creates impact far beyond any individual project.'

Why start a municipality community?

'By bringing municipalities together, we can identify shared challenges and opportunities where collaboration makes sense. This helps us better understand each other and develop projects that address real-world needs.'

In practice, this means constantly connecting with new municipalities, presenting the ELSA Lab and the community at conferences, facilitating conversations between members, connecting stakeholders, and helping translate research insights into concrete actions.

The goal is not simply to transfer knowledge, but to create long-term partnerships that enable municipalities to develop ELSA-oriented AI practices and capabilities.'

What challenges have you encountered?

'One challenge is that municipalities often face urgent operational demands, leaving limited time to reflect on the broader ethical or societal implications of AI. At the same time, you want to create an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable sharing their challenges and ways of working. That requires open discussion rather than simply sharing information.'

Creating meaningful impact across organisations takes time, trust, and a shared understanding of goals.'

What early signs of impact are you seeing?

'We only started in 2025, so it is still very early. However, I am proud that more and more municipalities are joining, and that the Province of Limburg is now attending the meetings. I think this shows that we have created something valuable. What we immediately noticed is that municipalities discover that their challenges are not unique and that solutions can be developed collectively. They do not have to reinvent the wheel themselves; they can learn from one another and collaborate on solutions. In their day-to-day work, there is often little room for these kinds of conversations. We try to create a space where researchers and practitioners can openly exchange perspectives and ideas. These conversations help ensure that AI innovation is grounded in public values and contributes to sustainable, system-wide improvements rather than isolated solutions.'

Contact Maurice
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'Creating meaningful impact takes time, trust, and a shared understanding of goals.'



[illegible]

Tomorrow's Impact Starts Here

Meet the newest ELSA Labs and discover the impact they hope to create.

The labs featured so far have shown what impact can look like in practice. From rethinking public safety to strengthening democracy and helping municipalities navigate complex challenges, their stories demonstrate that meaningful change rarely happens overnight.

The labs on the following pages are still taking their first steps. That doesn't mean they have less to say. Every new ELSA Lab starts with a challenge that matters and a belief that AI can be part of the solution, if developed responsibly. Each brings together researchers, public organisations, companies, and citizens to explore questions that do not yet have easy answers.

They may not have impact stories to share just yet, but they do have ambitious plans, fresh ideas, and a clear vision of the change they hope to create. While the first labs can already look back, these labs invite us to look ahead: what challenges are they tackling, what impact are they aiming for, and how do they plan to get there?



AI for Health Equity

Invisible Patients

[VISIT OUR WEBSITE](#)


Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming healthcare. From diagnosis and prevention to personalised treatment, AI has the potential to improve health outcomes for millions of people. Yet not everyone has the same opportunity to benefit. The ELSA Lab AI for Health Equity explores how AI can improve healthcare while ensuring that no one is left behind.



The challenge

Access denied

Healthcare technologies do not exist in a vacuum. Access to digital devices, health information and the internet varies widely across society. Differences in digital skills, health literacy and broader structural inequalities can prevent people from benefiting from innovations that were designed to help them. As a result, AI applications that promise better healthcare



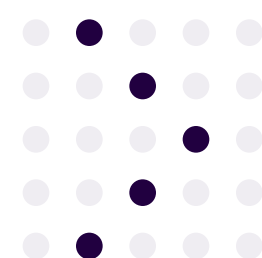
may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities. Our challenge is not only to develop innovative technologies, but to ensure they work for everyone.



The impact

AI prescription for equity

AI for Health Equity strives for a healthcare system in which AI technologies contribute to fairness, inclusion, and equal opportunities for all people. Our goal is to ensure that digital health innovations improve healthcare access and outcomes without increasing social or health inequalities. By supporting responsible and ethical AI development, the lab aims to strengthen trust in AI-based healthcare and help create a future in which everyone has a fair opportunity to benefit from technological innovation.



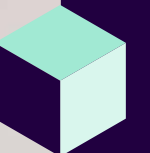
Prof. Dr. Julia van Weert



The ELSA way

Talking about (y)our health

The lab brings together researchers, healthcare professionals, policymakers, societal organisations and citizens to address shared challenges. This consortium approach ensures that research remains closely connected to practice, allowing new insights to be tested and implemented in real healthcare settings. By linking innovation, policy, and societal needs, the lab helps ensure that AI solutions are not only technically effective, but also socially embedded, practically applicable, and beneficial across diverse populations.



‘Our challenge is not only to develop innovative technologies, but to ensure they work for everyone.’



Prof. Dr. Mr. Aniek de Ruijter

Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform manufacturing. Yet many companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), struggle to adopt these technologies. The ELSA Lab for Technical Industry explores how AI can be implemented responsibly, helping small businesses innovate while safeguarding public values.

The challenge Stuck on the assembly line

AI adoption in the Dutch manufacturing sector remains relatively slow, especially among SMEs. If this gap continues to grow, it could deepen inequalities between companies that embrace AI

ELSA4TI

and those that do not, affect the industry's international competitiveness and create new challenges in the labour market.

At the same time, organisations face important questions about transparency, accountability, fairness, and compliance. How can companies benefit from AI while ensuring that these technologies remain trustworthy and aligned with societal values? How do we ensure the benefits of AI are available to the entire industry, not only the largest players? The ELSA Lab for Technical Industry (ELSA4TI) studies just that.

*Maud Hunnago, José Grabiél
Luis Cordova, Jeanne Mifsud
Bonnici, Lucas Noldus, Ifigeneia
Mavridou, Suhana Biswas, Christos
Emmanouilidis, Mirjam Plantinga, Job
Lanting, Ming Cao, Vincent Delke,
Rainer Harms (not everyone is in the
picture).*



AI in Production

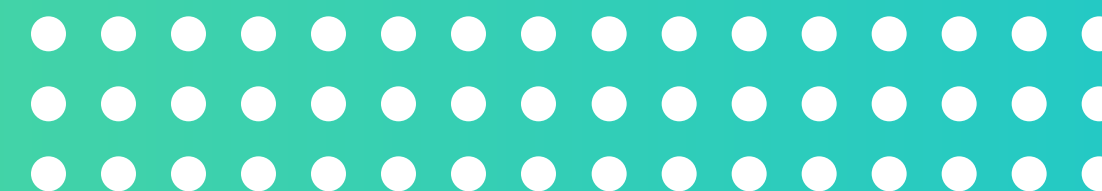


The impact Built on trust

ELSA4TI aims to accelerate responsible AI adoption across the technical industry. By helping organisations implement AI in ways that are transparent, fair, and accountable, it seeks to build trust among employees, customers, and society.

The ultimate goal is twofold: strengthening the competitiveness of Dutch industry while ensuring that AI contributes to social welfare, workforce development and long-term sustainability. In this way, compliance with AI regulations becomes a strategic advantage.

We're not aiming for regulations to hamper innovation, but for regulations that foster room to grow without losing the feeling of being in control as a business owner. By translating complex regulations into practical action, we support companies in building the skills, governance structures and confidence needed



Want to know more about
ELSA4TI?
Contact Job Lanting, project
developer j.b.lanting@rug.nl



to innovate responsibly. By working together, we make the adoption of responsible AI easier for small to medium enterprises.

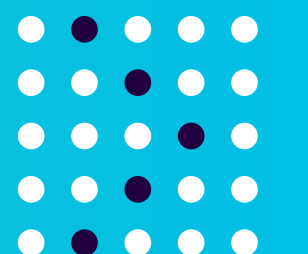


The ELSA way From prototype to practice

We develop and test practical tools that help organisations adopt AI responsibly. Together with industry partners, researchers identify legal, ethical, social, and technical barriers to implementation and explore solutions through a regulatory sandbox environment.

The resulting guidelines, assessment tools, model cards, policy recommendations, and roadmaps help organisations integrate AI into their operations while embedding ELSA principles into future technologies.

LINKEDIN





Decision Support

a Matter of Trust

AI can help doctors diagnose diseases, develop treatment plans, and monitor patients. Yet the technology behind these decisions remains largely invisible. How can patients and healthcare professionals trust AI they cannot fully understand? The ELSA Lab for Decision Support explores how trustworthy AI can become a natural part of clinical practice.

The challenge What's under the hood?

An MRI scanner must meet strict standards before it can be used in a hospital. Meanwhile, AI systems are increasingly supporting medical decisions too, however, the technology behind them is often far less transparent. As a result, healthcare professionals and patients cannot always assess how decisions are made or who is accountable when something goes wrong.

The ELSA Lab for Decision Support investigates how AI can become as trustworthy, transparent, and accountable as any other medical technology.

The impact Trust needs testing

For AI to become a trusted part of healthcare, it needs more than technical accuracy. Healthcare professionals and patients need confidence that these systems are safe, reliable, and used responsibly. For AI to become a trusted part of healthcare, it needs more than technical accuracy. Healthcare professionals and patients need confidence that these systems are safe, reliable and used responsibly. The lab aims to integrate legal, ethical, and societal requirements in the design and development of AI-based decision support systems.

'Our long-term ambition is to make quality control and certification of healthcare AI as routine as they are for other medical technologies. In this future, regulation is not seen as an obstacle to innovation but as an essential foundation for public trust.'



The ELSA way From case to clinic

Rather than discussing responsible AI in theory, the lab works on real-world healthcare challenges. Researchers collaborate with healthcare professionals, technology developers, legal experts, and other stakeholders to explore questions from technological, ethical, legal, and societal perspectives. Current projects focus on helping the ENDORISK decision support system make the transition from



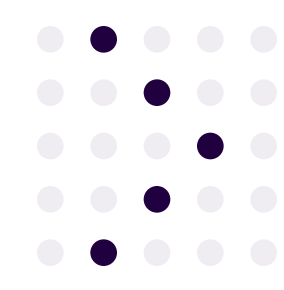
From left to right:
Michiel de Ruiter, Banu Buruk, Dorien Wellen, Ana Carolina Laurini Malara, Peter Lucas, Sam Woldringh, Pieter Wolters, Eva T.C. Lai, Fredrick Zuiderveen Borgesius, Johan Kwisthout, Joost Vossers, Mehdi Dastani, Marcos De Paula Bueno, Wico Mulder, Renier Joosse, Dragan Doder, Shruti Desai.



VISIT OUR WEBSITE 

ELSA lab
for Decision Support

academic research to clinical practice, understanding how AI models affect transgender patients, and exploring how Dutch large language models such as GPT-NL can responsibly analyse patient records while safeguarding data quality. Together, these case studies help identify today's obstacles and shape the conditions needed for trustworthy AI in tomorrow's healthcare.





Cities are growing fast while urban space is becoming increasingly scarce. At the same time, new mobility services and digital technologies are evolving rapidly. The Mobility DesAlign Lab explores how AI can help design mobility systems that improve accessibility, support better mobility choices and make cities more liveable.

Mobility DesAlign

Moving for the Better

VISIT OUR WEBSITE



MORE INFO



From left to right: Vaibhavi Srivastava (WhiteSpace Solutions), Bart van Arem (TU Delft), Gijs Beumkes (AIC4NL), Annelieke van den Berg (TNO), Bas Schilder (Gemeente Amsterdam), Pierre Kil (OpenRemote), Erwin Walraven (TNO), Maaïke Snelder (TNO), Mignon van den Berg (TNO), Daniel Scheerooren (AMS Institute), Martijn de Vries (Populytics), Matthijs Spaan (TU Delft), Martijn Koole (DOKdata), Rogier Kegge (Leiden University), Tom Alkim (MAPtm), Job van der Schalk (NWO). People & organizations missing on the picture:, Luuk Brederode (Goudappel), Sander Buningh (BAM), Patrick van Norden (MRDH), Joost Poort (AI Hub Zuid Holland), Geert Wissink (Amsterdam AI). Bram Nieuwstraten (Vervoerregio Amsterdam) and Anne Meuwese (Leiden University) are not in the picture but also members of the lab.



The challenge

Making room for living

Mobility is about more than getting from A to B. It influences where people can live, work, study, and access essential services. And designing mobility systems is becoming increasingly complex. Public authorities, developers, mobility providers, and citizens all have different priorities, while cities face growing pressure on space and infrastructure. The Mobility DesAlign Lab addresses this challenge by developing AI-enabled prescriptive digital twins: digital models that can generate and propose design solutions. These tools help stakeholders explore future scenarios and understand the consequences of mobility decisions before they are implemented. At the same time, the lab studies the ethical, legal, societal, and economic implications of these technologies, helping stakeholders use them responsibly and in line with the AI Act.



The impact

Moving people, not just traffic / Beyond the traffic jam

The lab aims to create mobility systems that improve accessibility, liveability, and sustainability. Better decisions about housing strategies, public transport, cycling infrastructure, shared mobility services,

logistics and traffic management can help create cities that are easier to navigate, safer to live in and less dependent on private cars. By supporting stakeholders in making more informed design choices, AI can help create urban environments that work better for both people and the planet.

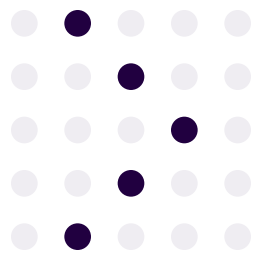
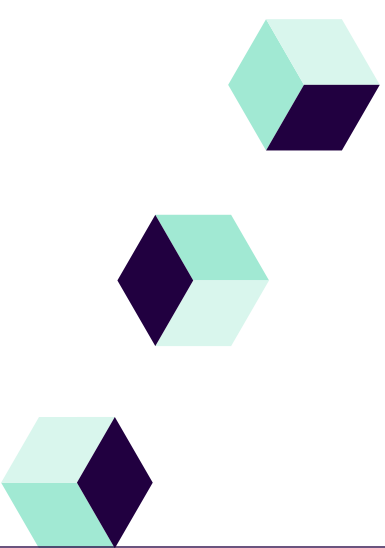


The ELSA way

It takes a village

The Mobility DesAlign Lab brings together public authorities, area developers, IT companies, consultants and researchers in a collaborative design process. Through a series of design cycles, stakeholders use digital twins to explore alternatives, test ideas and experience how future mobility systems might function before they are built.

This approach helps stakeholders not only design more sustainable urban areas, but also better understand how AI and data-driven technologies can be used responsibly in shaping the mobility systems of tomorrow.





The ELSA Declaration

& the AI Hype, Hope and Humanity Festival in Rotterdam

Five years ago, the ELSA Labs were given a clear mission: to help shape AI that is human-centric, rooted in public values, and developed together with society. In 2021, the Netherlands AI Coalition captured this ambition in [a position paper](#), which later formed the basis for a dedicated NWO funding programme. Five ELSA Labs set out to explore what responsible AI could look like in practice. A half decade later, we know more than we did then.

There’s no one ELSA Way
Within our ELSA Labs, we discovered things the 2021 position paper could not yet predict. We found that **being human-centric is not enough**. Public safety, media, democracy, defence, health, and food are not only shaped by people and algorithms, but also by the infrastructures, ecosystems, and resources that make these technologies possible.

Working across domains as diverse as public safety, media and democracy, defence, health, and food, the Labs have generated new insights, new questions, and new ways of thinking about impact. Some of these lessons confirmed what we already believed. Others challenged our assumptions.

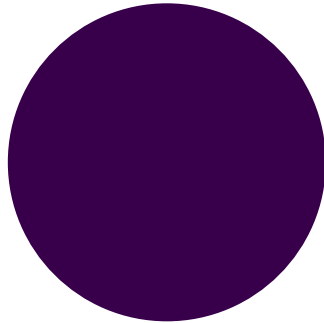
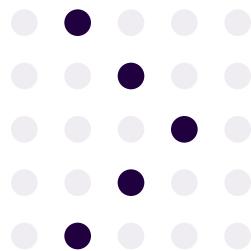
lead us next. It is a moment to honour the original position paper and to carry it forward into something more developed that guides our future with lessons from our past.

As the ELSA community prepares to gather in Rotterdam for the *AI Hype, Hope & Humanity Festival* in September 2026, the time feels right to reflect on what we have learned and where those lessons might

‘Meaningful participation often leads to more robust, legitimate and socially grounded outcomes’

As our projects progressed, it became increasingly clear that the societal impact of AI extends far beyond the interaction between humans and machines. Every AI system depends on energy, data, hardware, and global supply chains. It affects not only individual users, but also public institutions, communities, and the environments in which it operates.

An **AI-cology**, as some of us have begun to call it, looks beyond the human-algorithm loop to the data centres, energy systems, supply chains, and planetary





boundaries on which every algorithm depends. It invites us to ask broader questions: not only whether AI benefits people, but also what it requires from the world around us and who or what bears the costs.

We found that **innovation is never neutral**. The way we frame AI shapes the questions we ask, the problems we prioritise, and the solutions we consider desirable. When AI is primarily presented as an economic opportunity, questions about efficiency, competitiveness, and growth naturally take centre stage. Other concerns, such as justice, democracy, inclusion, and ecological responsibility, can quietly move to the margins. Responsible innovation requires more than technological expertise alone. It requires different perspectives to be brought into the conversation and paint the full picture.

We also learned that this **co-creation is harder than it sounds** – yet definitely more valuable than we initially believed. Bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, citizens, and other stakeholders requires (a lot of) time, trust, and a willingness to engage with different priorities and perspectives. Yet, meaningful participation often leads to more robust, legitimate and socially grounded outcomes.

Final lesson: **there is no single, holy ELSA way**. Plurality is not a weakness of the approach; it is its strength. The five Labs developed their own methodologies, vocabularies, and answers. Some leaned into design thinking, others into legal analysis, ethnography, or speculative practice. **The diversity is the point: ELSA is not a method to be standardised, but a sensibility to be cultivated.**

‘The societal impact of AI extends far beyond the interaction between humans and machines.’

The ELSA Declaration

Coming September, we’re planning to translate these and other lessons into an ELSA declaration that guides our future initiatives and enables new labs to learn from what has been built in the past. The declaration is not so much imagined as a finished document handed down to readers, but as a living text: one that listens before it speaks. Its creation begins in Rotterdam. Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, artists and citizens will gather at the *AI Hype, Hope & Humanity Festival* to explore some of the most pressing questions surrounding responsible AI.

The festival itself will not produce a declaration. Instead, it will produce an assemblage: a collage of voices, conversations, frictions, and shared ambitions gathered across three days of dialogue and reflection. An invited illustrator will help capture what words alone cannot. In the months after Rotterdam, this collective material will become the foundation from which the declaration grows.

A signpost, an invitation, and a commitment

The ELSA-declaration will serve three purposes. It is a signpost, capturing what the ELSA community has learned, where disagreements remain and what responsible AI may require in the years ahead. It is an invitation to continue the conversation across disciplines, sectors, and borders. **And it is a commitment to a future in which AI development is shaped by justice, democracy, ecological responsibility, and human dignity.**

BY MIRJAM PLANTINGA (PI ELSA-NN AND ELSA NETWORK PROJECT) AND GABRIELE JACOBS (PI ELSA LAB AI MAPS)



Join the conversation

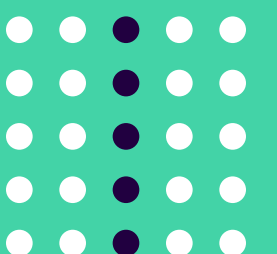
If you like to help shape the declaration and conversation about ELSA, contact us.



Contact Mirjam
m.plantinga@umcg.nl



Contact Gabriele
g.jacobs@essb.eur.nl





BY EMILE AARTS, ELSA LABS PIONEER AND EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF DATA SCIENCE AND AI AT TILBURG UNIVERSITY

The Next Chapter

Towards lasting impact in human-centric AI



The ELSA Labs originated from the Dutch Digital Society programme launched in 2017 by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (now Universities of the Netherlands). The programme recognised that digitalisation would not only be a technological challenge, but a societal one. It called for a fundamentally different way of developing knowledge, bringing together academia, government, industry and civil society in what became known as the quadruple helix model. Rather than being passive end-users, citizens and societal organisations became active co-designers of AI solutions.

This vision was ahead of its time. While many innovation programmes followed a linear path from research to technology to society, the ELSA Labs reversed that logic. Societal challenges became the starting point for AI development, ensuring that public values, societal needs and democratic legitimacy guided technological innovation from the very beginning. Researchers and stakeholders worked side by side in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary environments, continuously shaping responsible AI together. Recognising this potential, the Dutch Research Council (NWO) launched the national ELSA Labs funding programme in 2021, laying the foundation for a nationwide network dedicated to responsible AI innovation.

Lessons from five years of collaboration

Since then, the ELSA approach has delivered many results. A diverse collection of ELSA Labs has emerged, bringing together strong multidisciplinary partnerships and building valuable expertise. Together, they have shown that societal values can be embedded into AI design from the earliest stages, strengthening the Netherlands' international position as a frontrunner in human-centric AI.

The journey has also offered important lessons. Building sustainable innovation ecosystems takes time. Trust between partners, shared methodologies and effective governance cannot be created overnight; they require continuous investment. Equally, translating research into real-world implementation has proven just as challenging as conducting the research itself. Without opportunities for validation, scaling and long-term adoption, valuable knowledge risks disappearing when individual projects come to an end.

Beyond project funding

These experiences point towards a clear next step. Rather than launching another generation of temporary projects, the focus should shift towards creating a permanent national infrastructure for trustworthy AI. Such an infrastructure would preserve the networks that have been built, safeguard accumulated expertise, and provide the continuity needed to maximise long-term societal impact. Achieving this requires sustained investment that extends beyond research funding alone. Long-term support should also strengthen knowledge exchange, implementation, shared facilities, professional education and impact evaluation. At the same time, closer collaboration between individual ELSA Labs will allow successful methods, tools and best practices to spread more quickly across the national ecosystem while strengthening connections with European AI initiatives.

Why continuity matters

The Netherlands is uniquely positioned to lead this next phase. Its combination of scientific excellence, multidisciplinary collaboration and active public engagement is internationally distinctive. Allowing this capacity to fade after the current funding period would be a missed opportunity. At a time when trustworthy AI is becoming increasingly important for governments, businesses and society, continuity is not a luxury, but a strategic necessity.

'While many innovation programmes followed a linear path from research to technology to society, the ELSA Labs reversed that logic'

The ELSA Labs have demonstrated that responsible AI innovation is both possible and impactful. The challenge now is not to start over, but to build on what has already been achieved. By doing so, the Netherlands can continue to lead not only in developing AI technologies, but also in ensuring that AI serves people, society and the public good.

SDGs

One key aspect that connects all ELSA Labs to one another, but also to the wider context of AI for good, is that they are all connected to at least one main [Sustainable Development Goal](#) (SDG). The Sustainable Development Goals are the United Nations' comprehensive framework for advancing global well-being, environmental protection, and equitable development by 2030. Aligning their individual missions with a collective goal not only helps maintain and encourage drive, but also provides additional opportunities for collaboration and reinforces the relevance of each Lab's activities.

The ELSA Labs in this magazine

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All other labs can be found [here](#)



Colophon

Publisher

Brightlands Smart Services Campus
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Human Centric AI.

This publication is part of the project ‘Generating impact with ELSA Labs: Building the foundation for the ELSA Lab blueprint and network’ (with project number NWA.1332.203.001) of the Dutch Research Agenda (NWA) AI Synergy programme ‘Artificial Intelligence: Human-centred AI for an inclusive society – towards an ecosystem of trust’ which is (partly) financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

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READ ALL ABOUT THE ELSA CONCEPT ▶

ALL LAB LOCATIONS ▶

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ▶

The full ELSA Labs Portfolio

We warmly encourage you to visit the AIC4NL website to learn more about the individual labs’ missions and visions.

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ELSA AI Lab Northern Netherlands

Location

Groningen

Area of subject

Health & Healthcare

Project lead

UMC Groningen

Main Sustainable Development Goal

3

GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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ELSA Lab AI, Media & Democracy

Location

Amsterdam

Area of subject

Culture & Media

Project lead

University of Amsterdam

Main Sustainable Development Goal

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ELSA Lab Defence

Location

Soesterberg

Area of subject

Defence

Project lead

TNO

Main Sustainable Development Goal

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ELSA Lab AI 4 Sustainable Food Systems

Location

Wageningen

Area of subject

Agriculture and Food

Project lead

Wageningen University & Research

Main Sustainable Development Goal



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ELSA Lab AI MAPS

Location

Rotterdam

Area of subject

Public Safety

Project lead

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Main Sustainable Development Goal

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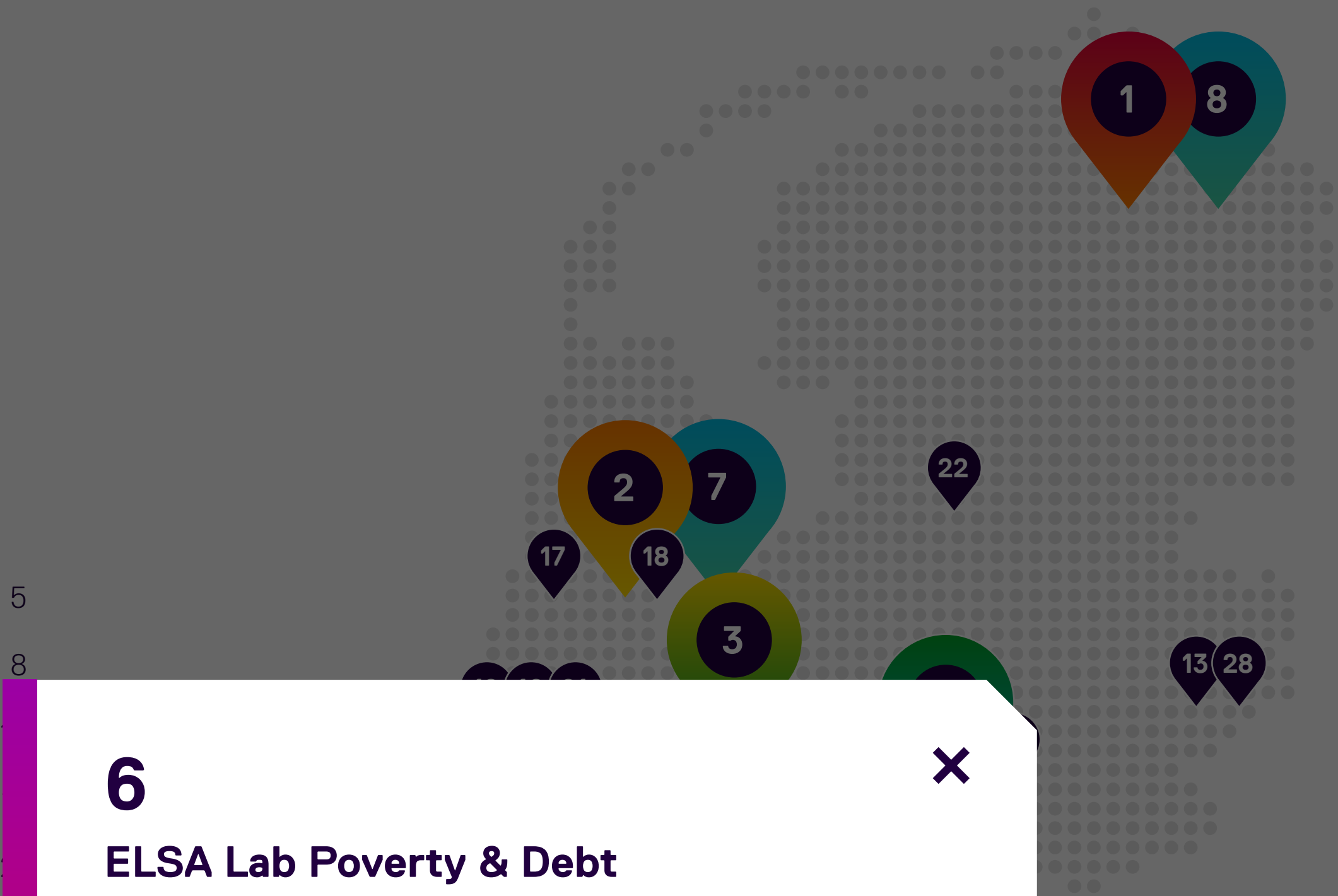
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ELSA Lab Poverty & Debt



Location	Heerlen
Area of subject	Public Services
Project lead	Brightlands Smart Services Campus
Main Sustainable Development Goal	

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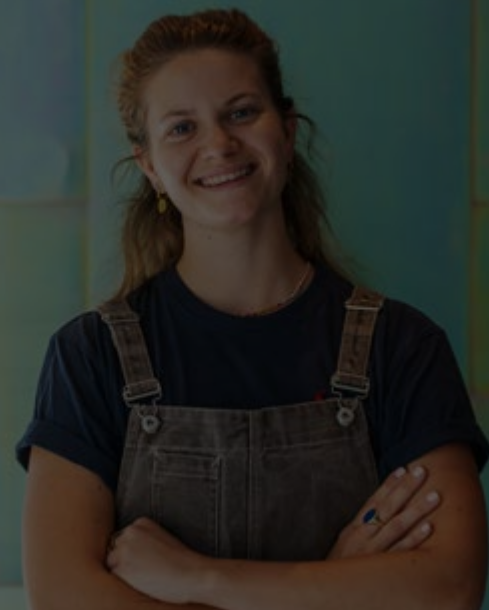
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A Shared Lens on Impact

This is the fourth edition of the ELSA Magazine. In each edition, we have placed the spotlight on a different aspect of the ELSA Labs: from the methodologies and processes at the heart of their work to the people who make meaningful collaboration possible. This year, we zoom out to consider the bigger question behind these efforts: why are we doing this, and what change do we hope to create? As Mirjam explains in her welcome, impact is ultimately about the difference our work makes.

BY LEONIE TRUTSCHLER

What has changed because the ELSA Labs were there? And is there a distinctive form of ELSA impact that can be recognised across the different Labs, sectors and collaborations?

What emerges is not one shared outcome, but a shared way of looking at the world. Jan Spijkerman counterweight to society: ‘more ELSA keeping the ethical, the technologies in mind’. a ready-made answer. tion: showing us to ask and what might

Minou van der Werf of **Poverty and Debt** approaches this from the perspective of systems thinking. The most valuable outcomes are not always finished products, but insights that reveal how challenges arise, which actors and mechanisms shape them, and how changes in one part of a system affect the rest. From this perspective, ELSA impact can also be found in bringing previously invisible relationships, assumptions and consequences into view.

Complex systems such as healthcare, mobility and public services can be influenced in many different ways. In this edition, each Lab highlights one concrete example of the change it aims to create, from shifting perspectives and improving collaboration to developing new tools, practices or policies.

The infographic on the next page brings these examples together and shows the different forms that ELSA impact can take.

Spotted our easter eggs? Sharp eyes! If you’re curious about their meaning, keep an eye out for next year’s magazine on sustainability and the ELSA Labs. Till then, stay sharp!

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