AI in legal aid: Beyond the hype towards sustainable applications

Steven Gibens

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, is often presented as a revolutionary technology that transforms sectors and optimizes processes. In legal aid, AI is a widely discussed topic, but there is a risk that this technology is seen as a temporary fad without sufficient attention to its long-term impact. It is essential to look beyond the hype and analyze the structural role of AI: which applications truly add value, how these technologies can be sustainably integrated, and what legal and ethical considerations are involved. For smaller non-profit organizations, AI is both a blessing and a curse.[1]

2. The contribution of AI to legal aid

AI is playing an increasingly prominent role in legal aid. Through AI technologies such as large language models (LLMs), chatbots, and predictive algorithms, legal processes become more efficient, and access to legal aid improves. AI supports the generation of legal documents, the development of self-help resources, and the acceleration of legal procedures (Chien et al., 2024). AI-driven chatbots guide citizens with legal questions and assist them in filling out forms, thereby increasing access to basic legal aid (Harvard Law School, 2024). Predictive analytics enhance case management and help legal aid providers assess legal outcomes (Byrom, 2024). Additionally, multilingual support through AI tools improves access to legal services for non-native speakers (Chien et al., 2024).

3. The impact of AI on organizations: internal and external

Internally, AI leads to more efficient legal processes, such as automatic document processing and advanced data analysis, allowing employees to handle cases more quickly and accurately. AI-powered knowledge bases improve internal knowledge sharing, while predictive analytics contribute to more effective case management. Automatic transcription and document generation reduce administrative burdens and speed up legal procedures (Chien et al., 2024).

Externally, AI enhances accessibility to legal aid through AI chatbots and personalized legal assistance services that provide tailored advice. Automation of standard procedures lowers costs and increases the speed of legal services. At the same time, predictive analytics help clients estimate potential legal outcomes. AI enables legal aid to be personalized and better aligned with the needs of justice seekers, which is particularly relevant for vulnerable groups.

Organizational restructuring for AI integration

The integration of AI in legal aid, both internally and externally, requires a fundamental restructuring of organizations. Traditional legal teams, consisting solely of lawyers, are no longer sufficient to effectively develop, monitor, and adjust AI systems. New disciplines, such as data scientists, ethicists, and technology specialists, are becoming increasingly important. Legal aid

[1] This text summarizes the challenges smaller legal aid organizations face, such as Helder Recht/Droits Quotidiens, based on various brainstorming sessions. The discussions benefited from input from McKinsey, Linklaters lawyers, and Jackie Janssen, a data specialist and former CDO of several major Belgian companies.

organizations will need to appoint specialized AI experts and data officers to ensure transparency, quality, and ethical implementation of AI systems (Janssen, 2024).

A crucial function in this transformation is that of the data officer, who oversees the quality of the data used to train AI models and ensures they are free of bias and misinformation. Additionally, a multidisciplinary team must be formed, consisting of lawyers, technology experts, and policymakers, to safeguard the long-term AI strategy within the organization. Regular audits, ethical checks, and training programs are necessary to keep AI systems accurate, responsible, and accessible.

4. The cost of AI in legal aid

The implementation of AI in legal aid involves significant costs, both in terms of initial investments and ongoing operational expenses. Legal aid organizations must account for costs related to the development, implementation, maintenance, and adjustment of AI systems.

Initial and structural costs

Implementing AI requires investments in infrastructure, such as powerful computing machines, software licenses, and cloud solutions. Additionally, legal organizations must invest in specialized training for staff to effectively use and monitor AI. Open-source AI models can reduce initial costs but often require technical expertise and continuous optimization to function effectively in legal contexts.

Market dynamics and pricing

Competition in the AI market influences the price and accessibility of AI solutions. Large language models and predictive AI systems, such as ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, and the more affordable Deepseek, demonstrate that large tech companies dominate the development and maintenance of advanced AI systems. This can lead to high licensing costs and dependence on commercial parties, making it difficult for smaller legal aid organizations to implement such technologies.

Impact on NGOs and small-scale legal aid organizations

For NGOs and small-scale legal aid organizations, which typically operate on limited budgets, AI implementation poses an additional financial challenge. Collaborations with research institutions and technology companies, leveraging subsidies, and securing external funding are crucial strategies to enable these organizations to integrate AI responsibly. Without such initiatives, AI may remain primarily accessible to commercial players, leaving non-commercial organizations behind.

Accessibility and cost management

To control costs and enhance the accessibility of AI in legal aid, policymakers and organizations must advocate for transparent pricing models, open-source initiatives, and public investments in AI development. This prevents advanced legal AI solutions from being exclusively available to well-funded institutions and contributes to fair access to AI-assisted legal aid.

For legal aid organizations, this means considering not only the initial investment costs but also the long-term expenses for maintenance and updates. If market prices remain high in the short term, a gap may emerge between larger organizations that can afford advanced AI and smaller entities that remain dependent on less powerful technologies.

Additionally, costs influence the accessibility of AI-driven legal aid. If AI solutions are primarily developed by commercial entities, there is a risk that affordable legal assistance will only be available to those who can afford it. This could lead to inequality in access to legal aid, a concern previously highlighted in discussions about a two-tiered legal aid system (Simshaw, 2022).

5. Bias in AI and liability in legal aid

One of the biggest challenges in deploying AI in legal aid is the presence of bias in AI systems (hallucinations). AI models are trained on existing datasets, which may contain inherent biases, leading to unequal treatment of clients. This is particularly problematic in legal applications, where unintended discrimination can have far-reaching consequences. Research has shown that some AI models, for example, impose harsher assessments on certain ethnic groups in criminal law or exacerbate inequalities in civil cases (Federal Judicial Center, 2023 in Chien et al., 2024).

Bias in AI not only leads to unjust outcomes but also raises questions of legal liability. When an AI system provides legal advice or influences a decision, it is unclear who is responsible for errors or harmful consequences. Is it the AI developer, the organization using the system, or the legal professional relying on AI? These issues make it necessary to develop regulations and ethical guidelines for the responsible use of AI in legal aid.

To mitigate the risks of bias and liability, AI systems must be transparent and explainable. This means that legal aid providers and clients must be able to understand how an AI model arrives at a particular conclusion. Additionally, regular audits and improvements in training data are essential to minimize bias and ensure fairness in AI-driven legal services.

6. Conclusion

While AI offers significant improvements for legal aid, careful regulation and ethical oversight remain essential. Transparency, explainability, and the prevention of bias must be central to AI implementation. AI should be used as a complement to human legal expertise, not as a replacement. Legal aid organizations must strategically and responsibly engage with AI technology to optimize internal operations and ensure access to legal aid for all citizens. This requires a well-considered and forward-looking approach, where AI is not seen as a hype but as a sustainable innovation in legal aid services.

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