

# Unlocking AI for all: a Global South perspective

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At its heart, inclusive AI is not just a technical concept; it is a vision for a future where AI serves everyone, not just a privileged few. As the AI market explodes in value, from US\$ 400 billion today to an estimated US\$ 1.81 trillion by 2030, it represents an extraordinary opportunity for entrepreneurs and innovators to build AI solutions tailored to their unique local contexts and needs. However, realising this potential requires intentional trade policies to regulate cross-border data flows, equitable access to essential AI infrastructure, and the rising tide of digital protectionism.

AI is fundamentally reliant on data. While data availability exploded across the Global North throughout the 2010s, this critical fuel for AI development has remained inaccessible in the Global South due to poor data infrastructure. Despite this gap, growing recognition of the importance of data has prompted governments to develop a patchwork of data protection legislation and AI policies. This fragmented landscape creates barriers to cross-border data flows for an already limited resource in the Global South. Startups must navigate complex, expensive regulatory mazes, characterized by burdensome procedures and limited resources in regulatory bodies, which severely limit the scalability and impact of AI solutions.

The challenge is intensified by data localization requirements mandating domestic data processing and storage. With less than 2 per cent of the world's data centre supply available on the African continent, blanket localization could cut it off from the AI revolution before that revolution even begins.

Yet within this challenge lies opportunity. Digital policies focused on ensuring that AI models are fine-tuned for national contexts can benefit emerging economies when implemented strategically. By investing in data infrastructure that makes critical, non-sensitive datasets, from agriculture to demographics, accessible, governments can unlock the untapped potential of applied AI innovation. Our young, digitally native populations are well-positioned to develop solutions that address local challenges, from supply chain transparency to financial inclusion. This not only creates significant local economic value and improves market access, but also benefits the

global economy through more efficient, transparent and fair trade. Building critical infrastructure for a country today means building data infrastructure, not just roads and hospitals.

Further opportunity lies in regional approaches that harness shared resources. Rather than isolated national policies, we need regional consensus on our shared future. While initiatives like the African Union Data Policy Framework and the US\$ 60 billion Africa AI Fund announced in Kigali, Rwanda in April 2025 are promising, we must go further by operationalizing the regional pooling of key resources in order not only to protect, but also to accelerate, AI development.

Creating regional frameworks that support open data, distributed computing (i.e., linking multiple computers together to solve complex problems) and talent development enables full participation in the AI revolution and allows people to move beyond fear-based barriers to active creation. We can shift from being mere technology consumers to becoming global contributors and creators.

For governments seeking to empower local innovators, the focus should be on creating enabling environments through small but critical policy changes. Sensible import duties on AI hardware to reduce infrastructure costs, streamlined patent registration and regulatory stability will enable entrepreneurs to invest in local research and talent while accessing global markets.

Achieving inclusive AI requires collaborative trade policies that balance protection with openness. By facilitating secure data flows, ensuring affordable hardware access and strategically leveraging digital sovereignty, nations can build an equitable global AI ecosystem.

AI's true potential is realised not through isolation, but through interconnectedness that preserves local agency while enabling global participation.

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